

Marshall University

Marshall Digital Scholar

0064: Marshall University Oral History
Collection

Digitized Manuscript Collections

1997

Oral History Interview: Velma W. Twyman

Velma W. Twyman

Follow this and additional works at: https://mds.marshall.edu/oral_history

Recommended Citation

Marshall University Special Collections, OH64-811, Huntington, WV.

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by the Digitized Manuscript Collections at Marshall Digital Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in 0064: Marshall University Oral History Collection by an authorized administrator of Marshall Digital Scholar. For more information, please contact zhangj@marshall.edu.

RELEASE FORM

Deed of Gift to the Public Domain

I, Velma W. Tryman, do hereby give to the Marshall University, Oral History of Appalachia Program (archives or organization) the tape recordings and transcripts of my interviews on July 13, 15, 1947.

I authorize the Oral History of Appalachia Program (archive or organization) to use the tapes and transcripts in such a manner as may best serve the educational and historical objectives of their oral history program.

In making this gift, I voluntarily convey ownership of the tapes and transcripts to the public domain.

Rita Wicks-Nelson
(Agent of Receiving Organization)

Velma W. Tryman
(Donor)

July 15, 1947
(Date)

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEWS WITH

MRS. VELMA W. TWYMAN

July 13 and 15, 1997

Harpers Ferry, West Virginia

Interviewers: Rita Wicks-Nelson, Ph.D. and Ancella Radford Bickley, Ed.D.

Transcriptionist: Ms. Gina Kehali Kates

RW-N: ...Ancella Bickley and I are talking to Mrs. Velma Twyman and we are in Harpers Ferry, West Virginia ready to go. Mrs. Twyman, we talked a little bit before about the fact that we are going to ask you a lot of things about your life, but we really want you to just to start and tell us. This...we have a lot of things that we are interested in but this is not structured, so you can lead us wherever you want to go, all right? If we don't get information we want, we'll come back and ask you about it again, so don't worry about—go any place where you want with this interview. Uh, we do find that it's easier on people, for the most part, if they start at the beginning, telling us where they were born and a little bit about their background and their parents' background. So, can you begin there?

VT: Yes, I was born in a little town called Rayville, Louisiana.

RW-N: Would you spell that for us?

VT: R-a-y-v-i-l-l-e, Louisiana. I grew up on a farm. I am the 13th of 14 children. Uh...my parents, Milton and Emma Wagner, were the proud parents of the 14 of us.

RW-N: And is Wagner, W-a-g-n-e-r?

VT: W-a-g-n-e-r, yes.

AB: How many girls and how many boys?

VT: There were 11 girls and 3 boys. Uh....

AB: And your folks farmed for a living?

VT: We farmed.

AB: What did you grow?

VT: We grew cotton, corn, soybeans, uh, oats, hay, uh, vegetable garden. At that time, I think we bought flour and sugar. I think that was about all that we bought.

AB: Was that your own land?

VT: Yes. It was our own land.

AB: How much? How much land?

VT: We had 80 acres.

AB: Eighty?

VT: Mmm-hmm.

AB: Oh, that's a lot. So, you grew up working on the farm.

VT: Grew up working very hard on the farm. And I kept working on the farm until I graduated from college.

AB: Where did you go to college?

VT: Grambling College, Grambling, Louisiana.

AB: How far was that from your home?

VT: About 75 miles. And...

AB: Were you the only one in your family to go to college, or did others go?

VT: No, others went. Uh...I have two brothers and two sisters who were in the field of education, so there were five of us who were teachers. There is one nurse. Those are the ones who completed college. There are others who went and did not complete at the time.

AB: Does anybody still live on the farm?

VT: I have a sister who lives on...on the adjoining, on a part of the farm. She bought a part of the farm and she still lives there.

AB: What about your parents? Are they still living?

VT: No, my parents are, are dead. My mother died in '65, and my father died in '70. My mother

was 65 and my father was 72 when they passed on.

AB: What was it like growing up with 14 children in the family?

VT: Noisy. [all laugh] That's probably why I don't talk much; I didn't have to. But it was a lot of fun. There were, we were about thirty years apart, so we never all lived together. It's kind of three sections, and each of the three sections are very close. We all try to get together about every 3 years. But the older ones are very close, the middle ones are very close, and the last three of us are extremely close.

AB: Well, when you have a family that size, and everybody changes clothes [inaudible]. [laughter]

VT: My mother washed every Monday. And the clotheslines were full. But I can, I only remember seven children living in the house at a time.

AB: Was it a big house?

VT: It was what?—three, four bedrooms. (AB: a good size house) A ranch style house, uh-huh.

AB: So, tell me, if you don't mind, a little bit about your family. I'm always interested in southern families who are property owners, because the stories that we always hear are of people who are sharecroppers and not owning their own property. So how did your family come to own their own home and farm?

VT: Perhaps I should start back with my father's parents. At the age of twelve, my father's father and grandfather were buried the same day.

RW-N: When your father was twelve years old?

VT: Mmm-hmm. Uh, his mother had, I think, twelve children; he was the oldest. There was property, they owned property. But somehow, the, some white families came in and said, "You're young, we will help you out." And that property got away from him through their help.

I don't know the complete history of that. But when he became a man, that was his prime thing: "I will own property." So, he did everything he could to own property. And he got, he got 80 acres of property and he bought that and paid for that.

RW-N: Do I understand correctly, now, the original property went back before your father's time?

VT: The original property went...

RW-N: There was ownership in the family, and then it was lost? Is that right?

VT: Right. Uh-huh.

RW-N: Can you tell us your father's name?

VT: Milton Wagner.

RW-N: Milton Wagner? And was he born in that same area?

VT: No, he was born in Mississippi. Greenwood, Mississippi.

RW-N: In Greenwood, Mississippi.

VT: Mmm-hmm. I don't remember any of his parents. I don't remember his mother or father. I remember his siblings. But uh, his mother was dead before I was born. And this is history that we have sat down later and I learned about; I did not know about this all the time. You know, how the older ones were sitting there and were talking and this came up. Because I always wondered why he was obsessed with owning property. And then I found out that he had lost property that he thought he was going to eventually own (AB: Mmm-hmm) through the goodness of people who were "helping him," and when he looked up, it was gone from the family.

RW-N: And did that incident happen, the loss of that property, was that in Mississippi or was that in Louisiana?

VT: That was in Louisiana .

RW-N: Uh-huh, so he was there since his childhood? (VT: Mmm-hmm) Yes. Can you tell us about your mother?

VT: My mother...my mother was a very lovin' person. She was soft-spoken, as I am. Uh, she did not work out of the home. She seldom worked in the fields. She stayed in the house and kept the house. Ah, a very religious woman, tried to teach us right from wrong. She was less authoritative than my father. She was the easy-going one.

RW-N: Uh...what was her name?

VT: Emma Davidson.

RW-N: D-a-v-i-d-s-o-n?

VT: d-s-o-n. Mmm-hmm.

RW-N: And did she come from Louisiana?

VT: She came from Louisiana. Her mother was in Tallulah, Louisiana.

RW-N: Could you spell that? [laughter]

VT: T-a-l-l-u-l-a-h, I think. She was raised by her aunt and uncle, which we know as our grandparents. We also know her mother as our grandmother. Her mother was, I think, one-quarter Blackfoot Indian. And she lived to be a hundred and seven years old.

AB: Did you know her?

VT: I did, I knew her.

RW-N: Now, how did you know her, uh, she still lived locally there, and she was (VT: she still lived in Tallulah) part of your life?

VT: Yes, she was a part of my life, and the aunt and uncle who raised her, were part of our life.

So, we had uh, Grandpa Jack and Grandma [name inaudible], and we had Grandma Della. And to me, it was just like somebody who had three grandparents. So, she uh, she took care of us. And I can remember that when we were growing up, every Saturday, she went into town to meet her father who is Grandpa Jack. And she loved ice cream, and he would buy her an ice cream cone every Saturday, as long as I can remember, as long as she was able to go in. And as many of us who went in, we (AB: he bought an ice cream cone); he bought an ice cream cone for us. And he had whiskers. And we would give him a kiss, and he would give us a quarter. But the whiskers would stick us and we would try to avoid the whiskers, but we knew that was the only way to the quarter. [laughter]

AB: The only way to get that ice cream cone.

VT: So, we got the ice cream cone and the quarter.

AB: So, when you say "go into town," how far out of town did you all live?

VT: Five miles.

AB: Five miles. (VT: Mmm-hm) And what were race relations like when you were growing up in Louisiana, in your town?

VT: When I was growing up, I, we were protected from the bad part of the race relations. We knew that we did not go to church with white people, even though our white neighbors came to our church. We did not go to school with them. But we lived here, and there was white family here. We spent the night with each other. We did everything, except went to school together, and dated each other. But there were three girls and one boy there. And we were just neighbors. In fact, at our last family reunion, two of those girls came to our family reunion.

AB: Do they still live in the area?

VT: They still live in the state, but not right there in the area.

AB: So they had to travel to get to the family reunion?

VT: One came from New Orleans, and we live in North Louisiana. And one lives, I think, 25 miles from there.

RW-N: So when you say, "we lived here, and there," you're talking about the houses were almost, they were very close together?

VT: Yes, there was a road between our house. We lived on the corner. And probably about as far as from here to the second stop sign down there was their house.

RW-N: And were there other neighbors around?

VT: Yes. There were other neighbors around.

RW-N: Black, white...? Was the community mixed...with regard to race?

VT: We lived here on this corner, on this road, which was probably the main road; there were two black families. There was uh, a school teacher who lived here, two white families, and we lived here. And then the rest of the road was white. But then when you went past our house down the lane, most of this area was black. However, uh, Mr. Morris, because the road is named after him now, was white. And then later on, white people moved back there. But most of that area back there was black.

AB: So, then the school that you all went to, this was before the schools were integrated?

VT: Mmm-hmm.

AB: And what was your school like?

VT: I started first grade in our church. Our church was one through eight. And when I went to school in first grade, I went to school there. When I became a second grader, the schools

consolidated, and the church school closed. So we went to the schools that were five miles from where I lived.

AB: Was that a one-room school?

VT: No, this was a school, one through twelve, and there were separate buildings and each classroom had their own room. But I think there were a building here for first and second grade, and third and fourth, something like that. But it was one whole high school from one to twelve.

AB: And how did you get to school?

VT: On a bus.

AB: On a school bus?

VT: On a school bus.

AB: How do you feel about the education that you got there?

VT: I think we got a really good education there, a very good education. Uh, I can remember every one of my teacher's names, from first grade through twelfth grade. And there is not a single teacher that I had that I wish that I had another teacher. I think all of them were very good.

AB: Uh, did you have any integrated experiences in school at all, while you were still [inaudible].

VT: None at all. Uh-huh.

AB: Yours was a totally. . .(VT: Totally) black. But had not integration begun when you were in school?

VT: No.

RW-N: Can we establish your age, so that we can get a framework? When is your birthdate?

VT: '43, 1943. January.

RW-N: Can you tell us your birth date?

VT: January 22nd, 1943.

AB: So you were only eleven years old when uh, in 1954, when the ses-, when schools were desegregated, with the Brown Decision. (VT: Un-huh) But it still didn't affect your life?

VT: No. We, I went to a totally segregated school throughout.

AB: Well, why was that? Weren't schools beginning to integrate even in Louisiana by that time?

VT: Mmm, not to my knowledge.

AB: Mmm, that's interesting. So you graduated from high school what year?

VT: Sixty.

AB: In 1960.

VT: Mmm-hmm.

RW-N: Your teachers were black?

VT: All of my teachers were black. Mmm-hmm.

AB: That's interesting, isn't it, that uh, that, that.... What about now? What's it like now?

VT: Now, it's integrated. As far as I know. There is a school for each community, and that community goes to that school. But most of the schools that I'm aware of, are integrated.

RW-N: Now, is that because there are black and white people in the communities, or are they, were they busing? I wondered if, if perhaps when you were a youngster, that they were not busing, and so the community was largely black, and the schools were black. But that doesn't seem to be the case, because there were some white children there, too.

VT: Well, when I was a child, we were bused, but black kids were bused to the black schools, (RW-N: to the black schools) and white kids were bused to the white schools.

RW-N: Right.

AB: Uh, you say your sister still lives in the family area? (VT: Mmm-hmm) Does she have children?

VT: Her children are all out of school.

AB: And did they go to integrated schools?

VT: They went to integrated schools.

AB: And do you know how they felt about it; how were they treated? How did your sister feel about their going to those schools?

VT: I can't remember any specific incidences that she mentioned to me. I kind of have a feeling that in the south, at least the area that I'm, I am familiar with, when they decided that you need to do this, most of them just did it. I don't remember anything that stood out in my mind as this was when integration started. I know that when I go south now, the feeling is much, you're more comfortable with white people in the south than I am with a lot of white people around here. I think it was a thing, that was the thing to do at that time, so we did it. Okay, now, this is the thing to do. So, you know, you're going to find some that who are die-hards. But the atmosphere there, I feel is a bit more comfortable than the atmosphere here.

AB: What about the social aspects of growing up in a place like Louisiana, uh, did you travel? Did you get on a bus, I mean, did you have to sit on the back of the bus? Were there movies or anything that you went to? Or when you all went into town to get that ice cream cone, how was that for you?

VT: Well, when we went into town to get that ice cream cone, we were downtown, there were white people downtown, like the people that you knew...like our neighbors, if you saw them, they would speak. The others, you know, just...it was just two separate societies. Uh, our social

activities were within our church and within our school. And we, the thea-, there was a theater. And my father was religious, so we didn't go to the theater. The people that went to the theater that I remember, were in the balcony, and the white people were downstairs.

RW-N: And how about where you bought the ice cream cone?

VT: That was white-owned; it was a Dairy Queen, I remember, on the corner. And over on the side where the shade from the building was, were benches. And you would go to the Dairy Queen and get your ice cream and come over and sit, and that was a socialization place for black people, and some white people would pass there, that you knew that were in town about that same time. Some of them would speak, some of them wouldn't.

AB: How did the people who, from who you bought the ice cream, treat you?

VT: This has been some time ago. But I think there was a separate window at that time for black people. But white people went to the front, and the black people went to the side. Uh, and gradually that changed.

AB: How do you feel about that time now, when you look back on it? Do you...did you grow up with any anger about the racial situation?

VT: I did not, because I didn't—that was the way of life for us. We never...I mean, it was just established that this is yours and this is mine. And we did not...it was a thing that you don't miss...you can't miss what you can't measure. Uh, later on, you know, we were able to measure those things. But I can't remember any hostility between blacks and whites. I can't remember saying, "Stay away from that." It was an unspoken thing. You just did not, there were places that you just didn't go. But I can't remember any harassment when I was growing up at home. When I was in college, I came home to my sister's, which was in Monroe, which is a small city.

And I can remember them saying, the Klan is out tonight. But I have never seen any of them. There was a minister at home that was beaten that night. But still, we were kind of protected from that. My dad kind of protected us from knowing the real reasons why these things were going on. And I still never saw the minister. It wasn't publicized too much in the papers that I am aware of. So, those are things that I, and a lot of bad things I continue to forget, too. So, I could be, could have wiped a lot of those things out.

AB: Your father was essentially cheated out of his family land. Did he have much anger about that?

VT: He did. But he did not pass that down to us. Because I didn't know about it until after he was dead. I knew that he had an obsession with owning property. But uh, the reasons behind it, I didn't, didn't know.

RW-N: So you're assuming that he had to have some anger since he had an obsession, or perhaps your older siblings had said, yes, he really was angry about that. (VT: Yes. uh-huh)

AB: But he never talked with you all about it? He never...he didn't promote any kind of racial uh, anger among, with his children, or anything like that?

VT: No. And another story that I learned, uh, there was a merchant in town that we, he bought all of our things from, I mean, all of our clothes, all of our shoes, everything he bought from this particular merchant. This merchant was instrumental in his being able to buy the property that we have. Because at that time, you had to have somebody sign for you, or stand for you. This merchant stood for him. Just recently, I found out that this white merchant was my father's cousin. But we never knew that. And I know that we had a lot of advantages that some other black people did not. I did not know why, until I learned this fact. And I can look back and it's

now plain.

AB: When you say your father's cousin, do you know how that relationship came to be?

VT: I don't.

AB: You don't know whether they were the children or grandchildren of brothers or anything like that?

VT: I don't know the exact relationship. My baby sister knows. My, my father wanted the baby to be a boy. She was a girl. So he took her every place he went. She knew all of this. None of us knew this. And the reason that she knew it is because she was with him, and she overheard a lot of things. It may have been that had he entrusted that fact to us, and we mentioned it in the wrong place, we would have been in trouble. So that might have been why he kept it from us. And she just told us maybe three or four years ago.

But I know that in that store we could go in there, and there was an x-ray machine where he would x-ray our feet. We have long, narrow feet. He had to order our shoes, and this store ordered our shoes. And while—his name was Mr. Griff—and while Mr. Griff and my dad were talking, we could play with that x-ray machine. [I] thought that was normal. And then she [my baby sister] said, "Did you go in any other store, and do any of these things?" Well, I thought we did that because that was the only store we went into. I was thinking had we gone in the other stores, we could have done the same thing. No, we couldn't have.

AB: Was there slavery in your family?

VT: I am not aware of it. I'm pretty sure that there was. But...I'm sitting here now and a lot of things have probably, we could have learned from my dad. He was in a position that he couldn't tell us, for our own safety.

AB: Uh, so, this gentleman who owned the store, who was a cousin, did he have brothers and sisters and other relatives there, too?

VT: I'm not aware of anyone else that was related to him. I don't know. And another reason that that stands out in my mind, I think I was in 9th grade. It was in '57 that our house burned and we lost everything. I was in the fields working, [that is] where all of us were – my dad, my mother, another sister, and I. Two sisters had gone to camp, so they had some clothing with them. I had nothing except what was on my back. This merchant called the neighbor and told the neighbor to tell my dad to bring the children who were home up there and to get an outfit. [We] went up there and I picked out this uh, gray skirt with pink flowers and a pink blouse, and when I got home, I had underwear, I had everything I needed, shoes, everything. That should have told me something. No other merchant did that for us. But I....

RW-N: Would it...it seemed one of the things that it would tell you is at least one nice, white man in town who was nice to your family. (VT: That's what I thought) And that's true, of course. (VT: Mmm-hmm) But the story was a little more complicated.

VT: Yeah, that's what I understand. And I also understand with this incident, that when we rebuilt, this merchant wanted us to build a bigger, better house. And he would have backed it. But my dad said, "No, I can't do that, because if I do that, somebody's gonna wonder where the money comes from."

RW-N: Did he ever come into your home, this merchant?

VT: No, no.

RW-N: And you never went into his home?

VT: The only place I ever saw him was in that store.

RW-N: And he was a first cousin, do you believe?

VT: Mmm-hmm, I think he was a first cousin.

RW-N: So, when you were growing up, you knew that one of your grandmothers was American, an American native woman. (VT: Uh-huh) You knew of no other whites in the fam-, you knew of no whites in the family?

VT: No, I knew of none.

AB: But now we think there probably were some? You just could not identify them at that time.

VT: Then, uh, we had uh, nice antique furniture. But at the time, in the south, you didn't think of it as antiques. I lately found out that those antiques came from this white merchant's relatives.

AB: Were those things that were lost in the fire?

VT: Yes, most of them were lost in the fire.

RW-N: They came from the white relatives? White, your white cousin's. . . .(AB: family's) family's. Uh-huh.

VT: Uh, this white merchant's father owned a funeral home in Mississippi. So, there was money in that family.

RW-N: But you never saw that family?

VT: I never saw that family. I didn't even know they existed, until three years ago.

AB: Has anybody, since that time, attempted to trace the family relationships?

VT: I have a nephew in California who has mentioned doing it. But I think with his job, it has not afforded him the time to do it. But it is, it is very interesting to find out. Because there is something back there that I would love to know.

AB: And your older brothers and sisters don't have any, any feel for any of that, any...uh...

VT: No, my dad kept that from all of us. The only reason that my baby sister knows it is that she overheard it.

AB: Mmm-hmm. And there are no aunts and uncles, anybody around, that could shed any light on any of it for you?

VT: None that we've been able to find. (AB: Not even any neighbors who might know?) I'm not sure that the merchant's, that Mr. Griff's family knew the relationship. I think he and my dad were the only ones who really knew. Because I cannot remember any of my father's siblings having the relationship that they had. So I wonder if he was doing that because he knew the struggle that my dad had with losing the land and all. But I'm trying to figure out why he didn't share that with my dad's siblings. (AB: Mmm-hmm) So, there's a lot there that is very interesting, that I would love to find out.

AB: So, you spoke about your family's relationship to the church, and you started school in the church. What kind of church was that?

VT: It was a Baptist church.

AB: A Baptist church. (VT: Mmm-hmm) And your mother and father were very active in the (VT: Very active) church?

VT: Very active. My father was the person who taught the Sunday School teachers. And he would study his lessons at home on Thursday nights. So, we would have to do bible study with him on Thursday nights, then go to church with him on Friday nights, while he taught the teachers the same lessons we learned on Thursday nights. So, we got a double dose. [laughter] Then we were back in church on Sunday again, getting it from the Sunday School teachers.

AB: So you got the lesson three times?

VT: Three times.

AB: So you knew it very well.

VT: Very well. But, just like I say, after I got out of the home where I didn't have to do it, I didn't do it for awhile. And it left, and I'm very sorry about that. I wished that I had kept it up. Now, my baby sister, you can start a bible verse, and she can tell you where to find it, who said it, and the history behind it. I can't do that.

RW-N: So what role is religion playing in your life now? You mentioned that you go to church.

VT: Yes, I go to church now.

RW-N: Is that the Baptist church?

VT: No, I'm Episcopalian and...

RW-N: Oh, that's right, I'm sorry. Yes.

VT: And an Episcopalian by marriage. My husband is an Episcopalian. And when I came here, I was looking for a church. And I happened to marry him before I found a church. And I just went to church with him.

AB: So, let's go back to your high school, uh, what were social activities when you were in high school? I mean, were there dances, basketball games, band, anything like that?

VT: We had a band. I played drum in the band. Do you believe that? Snare drum. We had a band and we were invited to parades and that. We did not have a football team, we did not have a baseball team. We had a basketball team.

RW-N: How big was your school, do you remember?

VT: In my graduating class there were 35. So, it was a very small school. Uh, the basketball team was very good. We had very good coaches. And they probably won the championship

almost every year. Uh, another tidbit that I learned later was that our basketball coach was so good, that on Saturdays, I believe, he coached the white schools in a remote area. [chuckle] Nobody knew that he was coaching.

AB: When uh, here in West Virginia, one of the things that we learned is that many of the uniforms, or the books and what-not, that we got when we were in school, came through the white schools. I mean, they used 'em first, and they passed 'em on to us. Was that the case?

VT: That was the case with us. That was the case.

AB: So, you, when you graduated from high school, did you all have robes and a big ceremony and what-not?

VT: The graduation, yes, that was a big thing. We had the prom, we had the graduation, we had all of those things.

AB: And for proms, that was in the high school gym?

VT: In the high school gym.

AB: You decorated?

VT: We decorated. Uh...I'm, I can see streamers now coming from the ceilings. And I don't remember a band, you know, now they have a band. But I think we just had records. And I remember this blue dress that I wore that was strapless, with a net that came around the shoulders. (AB: Long? All the way to the floor?) No, it was uh mid-calf. Mmm-hmm.

AB: And what about your date? What'd he have on?

VT: My date was my dad! [laughing]

AB: Ohh!

VT: At the time, there were more, there was more than one guy that I really wanted to go with,

that I was friendly with. The one that I wanted to ask me was not the first one, so I turned [the first one] down. And I didn't feel that I could go when [the one I preferred] asked me because I turned that [first] one down. So, my dad took me and dropped me off and came back and picked me up. But I think that was more fun than going with any one person.

RW-N: And that was acceptable?

VT: Uh-huh, yes. Yeah, there were other kids whose parents came and stayed. There were kids whose parents dropped them off. And there were kids who came with their, their dates.

RW-N: And when you were in high school, you played the drum in the band. Were you involved in other kinds of activities, that were organized, clubs...?

VT: I'm trying to remember...I just remember the band, because that was fun.

RW-N: What kind of subjects did you study in high school?

VT: Uh, I had algebra I, algebra II, geometry. I had history, uh, I took typing, I took uh...I didn't take shorthand, we didn't have, I didn't take shorthand. I had home economics. That's a different story. I was on the home economics roll. But the agricultural teacher used our farm as the experimental station. And when the guys went to the farm, I went to the farm with them. So, and that was during the time I should have been in home economics. (RW-N: Yes) So, I didn't...

RW-N: Do you remember any science courses?

VT: I had science, I had uh, chemistry. But you know, we didn't have the equipment for the experiments that we should have had. I think I had two years of science. I had chemistry. I had three years of math, I know. English, I had english, four years of english. And...

AB: Did you have a foreign language?

VT: No, we didn't have a foreign language. Uh, we had a chorus and I sang in the chorus; that was another activity that I did.

AB: Did they travel? I mean, the chorus and the band, did you all go to other communities to perform?

VT: We...did, but not extensively. For the chorus, I can remember uh, practicing for the state championship. And we would go some place for a state championship once a year.

RW-N: Now, that would be integrated?

VT: No.

RW-N: That was not integrated? That was a state for black schools?

VT: Mmm-hmm, right. I don't remember any integrated activities at all, when I was in high school.

AB: Was there uh, a close relationship between the community and the school?

VT: Very close. Very close.

AB: And the church, were there other churches beyond the Baptist church in your community?

VT: I'm trying to think where the Methodist church was. I'm sure there was a Methodist church. Uh...I think that was in Mt. Zion, was the Methodist church. But at that time, we didn't segregate Baptist and Methodist. You know, you had your, your church at your church, and if you were Methodist and something was going on at your church on a certain Sunday, we would all go to your church and support you. But it was-, and that's where most of our social activities were, in the church. Almost every Sunday we were at some church, doing something uh, usher board, and the choir's anniversary or the pastor's anniversary or something like that. Almost every Sunday.

AB: Ah, when we were talking about the prom and we were talking about dating, were you permitted to date? I mean, could fellows come to your house and visit with you when you were growing up? Or your sisters?

VT: They could come. Uh...some of my sisters dated. I was not a one-person [person]; I did not really want to do that. Our front yard was a ball diamond. And I can remember that my dad was religious, and we didn't play ball on Sundays. Until one day, we had been playing ball and I think he knew it. I know the preacher knew it. The preacher came in and we were hiding the ball. And the preacher said, "Throw it to me." [laughing] We threw it to him, but it was okay after then, we could play ball every Sunday. So that was kind of a hangout for the boys. And I just didn't choose to pick one. Uh...

AB: Would he have allowed it?

VT: To a degree. But my father was awfully smart. At that time, you didn't know too much about homosexuality. He consented for me to stay out until midnight with this one guy. [laughs] Years later, I found out that he was homosexual. So, but with 11 girls, I think he felt he had to be extremely careful with the boys. (AB: Mmm-hmm) And it wasn't unusual, because there were other people in the neighborhood who did not endorse dating because we lived in the country, and to go any place, you had to get in the car with guys. Double dates, okay. We did double dates. But we didn't call it dating. We just said we were going such and such a place, usually to another friend's house, or something like that. But not dating per se.

RW-N: Then how did your sisters pair off eventually with the men they married? That happened later? Did any of them marry young? Was that from visiting in the neighborhood?

VT: Most of them-, two of them that dated married people who were in our church. So, they

were in the crowd that came to the house. (RW-N: yes, mmm-hmm) And I do remember some of them dating. But for some reason, I wasn't ready to...to date one guy. I had, you know, lots of guy friends and lots of girl friends, and we did things together. But not...I just don't remember really particularly caring about dating. Mainly because I knew my father was going to ask him who his mother was, who his father was, what his mother did for a living, what his father did for a living, what church he went to. So, I didn't particularly want to subject anybody to that.

AB: Now, when you graduated from high school, did you go immediately to college? Or were you out any length of time?

VT: I went in September.

AB: You graduated in May or June or so...

VT: Graduated in May, and went in September.

AB: ...entered that fall. Were you the only one of your family who was there at that time? Or did you have any brothers and sisters also at Grambling while you were there?

VT: No, I was the only one there at that time.

AB: And you went straight through.

VT: I went summer and winter. And I...I went in September '60, and I got out January '63.

AB: And how do you feel about your experience at Grambling?

VT: I think it was lovely. It was...because there I was exposed to a broader group of people. Uh, being on the farm, you did not have access to transportation for all of us to go all the places that we wanted to go. So, you got to Grambling, here are all of these people. And you met all of these people. But it was still an extended home, because if I wanted to leave the campus, my mother would have to write a letter to the Dean of Women, giving me permission to leave the

campus. So, it was just like I was home. It was just like the neighborhood had followed me there. And uh, except there were more people there.

AB: Were most of those people at Grambling from within the state, or did they come from distances?

VT: Some of 'em came from distances. I had a roommate that was from Alabama.

AB: Mmm-hmm. But most were southern? I mean, did you get any northerners, anybody from New York or New Jersey or any place like that?

VT: Not that I knew, or not that I can remember, no.

RW-N: How did you decide to go to that college?

VT: My father decided for me. [chuckle] I really did not want to go to college. Uh, mainly because I knew it would drain the family resources. I did not think that we could afford it, that I could afford to go. And I couldn't. The family could not afford to send me to college. Uh, two other sisters before me had started, got married. And they had used the money that, you know, had they gone on, they could have brought the money back. And that didn't happen. So, I thought I was gonna go to the Air Force. No, that wasn't my father's idea. About maybe...March of that year, he brought me a paper and sat down and said, "I'd like you to fill this out." And I asked him what it was all about, he said this is pointing toward college. So, I sat down and filled it out, you know, because I wasn't going. I didn't see how I could possibly go. Why would I even bother too much with it? And in May [recorder beeping]...he came back.

END TAPE 1 - SIDE 1

BEGIN TAPE 1 - SIDE 2

RW-N: Okay, you want to go on? So, in May...?

VT: In May he came back and informed me that that was a national defense student loan. And I would have, I would be going to college, and I had to decide which one. So then I decided Grambling.

RW-N: So, tell me a little bit more about that. You said, "I probably didn't want to go to college," and you implied it was because you thought the financial situation wasn't that good. Did you have, putting the financial stuff aside, would you have wanted to go to college, or you hadn't thought through it any more, or you could have done a lot of different things? What was your state of mind that you - to the extent that you can recollect that?

VT: At the time, I had two choices. I either went to college, or went into service. (RW-N: Uh-huh) Because there were not that many opportunities. And I was looking for something to get me off of the farm. [chuckle] So, those were the only two places that I want-, that I thought I could go. I am extremely happy that I did go to college.

AB: How big was Grambling when you went? How many students?

VT: Oh, I'd say 2,000...I'm trying to think...it was small.

AB: Was that before its powerhouse football days?

VT: No, that was during its powerhouse football days, yeah. Willie Brown came from there, and Buck Buchannon came from there. Ah, yeah, that was right in the glory days. Uh....

RW-N: Can we go back uh, to your earlier childhood years for a few more minutes? Let's see...uh, you don't remember World War II? (VT: No) Uhm...what-, in the larger world, do you remember any particular kinds of events that you were aware of, at least as a child?

VT: I can remember I had two brothers in the war.

RW-N: In World War II?

VT: And uh, I guess it was World War II. Around '40...late '40's? Mmm-hmm, yes. I had three brothers in, in the war at that time.

RW-N: Who went away into the service? (VT: Mmm-hmm)

AB: Did they go outside the country, as far as you know?

VT: Yes. Uh...

AB: Now, Korea was underway in the early '50's. (RW-N: Yes) This was before, World War II ended when? in '46? '45? Uh (VT: I, I) Five years later we were into Korea.

VT: I'm not real sure which one it was.

RW-N: Do you remember any impact on that in the family, or on you? Or happy-go-lucky childhood, just accepted that or...?

VT: Yeah, I can remember that my mother was extremely worried about the boys. That, that is the only memory that I have, that she was extremely worried about her sons. And I can remember when one of them came home, at how elated she was. I can, I can remember that.

RW-N: Do you remember which brother that is?

VT: That was the baby brother, Jack.

RW-N: Jack. And so you remember the moment Jack walked in the door?

VT: Yes.

RW-N: Tell us about that.

VT: When he walked in the door (RW-N: What time of the day was it?) I think that was mid-afternoon. (RW-N: Uh-huh) And my father was not one to cry. And I can remember him breaking down, crying. And my mother just stood there and she just, just held him and just held him and just held him.

RW-N: What were your feelings? Or was it, did it seem more removed?

AB: You must have been very small.

VT: It seemed [inaudible; overlapping voices] (AB: four or five years old?) to me. I, you know, it's just, that's the moment that I remember. And I can remember her talking about her children. [clock chimes] Evidently there were neighbors who also had sons, and they were talking about their children. And I can remember the sense of her being worried about them. But I don't remember a lot about that time.

RW-N: Is there anything else in the larger world, that you can recollect?

VT: I'm trying to see... Not too much from, from when I was much younger.

RW-N: How else would you characterize your relationship with your parents? Your father was more authoritative? (VT: Mmm-hmm) Or authoritarian? Was he rather strict? (VT: He was, mmm-hmm) Uh, when...

AB: Who made the decisions in the family?

VT: Uh, my father made the decisions.

RW-N: And when...

AB: Did he do it after consultation, or did he just say this is the way it's gonna be? Or did he and your mother go and sit down and discuss it, or did he just say this is the way it is?

VT: Now, we're talking about Louisiana. And I don't remember them doing too much discussion. But then, I don't remember a lot of men in Louisiana doing too much discussion with their wives. Uh...if I am not mistaken, Louisiana is a community property state. And the man rules whatever. We bought a house in Louisiana three years ago. And I wanted the house in my name...[interruption]

AB: Bought property, you and your husband? Bought property in Louisiana?

VT: We bought property in Louisiana. And we wanted it put in my name, and they would not put it in just my name.

RW-N: Even today?

VT: Even today. (RW-N: Three years ago) Three years ago. Yeah. So, Louisiana has made men think that they are superior to women.

RW-N: In-, when you grew up in the family, did you have the feeling that your father was superior to your mother? Or in certain ways? Can you talk a little bit about that?

VT: I thought that he was the ruler of the household. (RW-N: Mmm-hmm) Mmm-hmm, I did think that.

AB: Were you afraid of him?

VT: I wasn't afraid of him but I feared him, if that makes any sense to you.

AB: Did he ever spank you?

VT: Once.

AB: Did your mom spank you?

VT: Twice. [chuckle] No, they, they didn't do—they spanked their children. I was not one that did things that deserved spanking. I was one of these good people who went by the teachings of the church, that if you are good, everything is gonna turn out okay. And I guess my life has pretty well been that way.

RW-N: So your relationship with them was that you were the good kid, and so you didn't get in a lot of trouble with Mom and Dad? (VT: No) You were easy to raise, they might say?

VT: Yes, I was easy to raise. But then there was something in our family that when you became 21, you were grown. And that's when I started to question my father. And he and I could sit

down and we could discuss a lot of things. And I could question some of the things that he felt were rules. And he still thought they were rules, but I could tell him that I didn't really see them his way. And he and I really became very close, talking.

AB: When you say rules, what, for example, what would you mean? You mean like...?

VT: Okay, there was a rule in our house that you were home by midnight, unless you were out with your husband. Uh...that's the one that I remember the most, I think, because that one, after I became 21 and all, I did not want to abide by. Uh, but there were rules that you went to church. There were rules that uh, you did no work on Sundays on the farm. Sunday was for church. That was the day of rest. Ah...let me see some other rules...

AB: Now, this was after you had gone to college and come back home?

VT: That I...

AB: When you would have these discussions with your father?

VT: Mmm-hmm, yes.

AB: You were still a college student? You had not graduated then?

VT: Well, it started when I was in college. Ah. . . .

RW-N: How did he respond to that, when you would challenge that, challenge the rules?

VT: Because, I think, because I am soft-spoken, and would just say that I see it this way and I was that age, there was not much he could do, except...

RW-N: Did you break the rules? When you came home from college, did you start breaking them, to some extent?

VT: There were times that I stayed out past midnight.

RW-N: And not much was done about that?

VT: Oh, no, no.

AB: Did he raise his voice and fuss with you?

VT: No, he would just say uh, throw a hint like, "I think I heard a car come in about such and such time," you know, that kind of thing. And I would say, "Yeah, I think that was me." And I didn't even give him chance to go any further. I would say, "If you want to know where I was, I was at such and such a place." And at that particular time that I remember saying it, I was at his sister's house. But uh, he just thought that there were rules, and they were to be followed.

RW-N: Did, did his having rules interfere with your having positive feelings toward him?

VT: I have always admired him. I think he is probably the most admired person in my life. (RW-N: Mmm-hmm) And it's probably from whence he came and the things that he had to endure. And the commonsense that he taught us. He was one of the wisest men that I've ever known.

AB: What was your father's educational background? Had he uh. . . ?

VT: I think he went to the 6th grade.

AB: What about your mother?

VT: My mother probably went to 8th grade. But, there were times that you sat down and you did your school work. He was big-, they were both big on education. I mean, that was first.

RW-N: They agreed on that?

VT: They agreed on that. Now, there were a lot of things they did agree on. And they probably discussed them when I was not aware of it. But the decision that he made was usually the decision that we abided by.

RW-N: But his decision would be the one. If your mother had a different opinion, he won out on that.

VT: Evidently they discussed it when I wasn't listening, because she very seldom voiced a different one.

RW-N: Mmm-hmm. Can we go back to your statement that one of the things, one of the reasons you admire him is for what he had to endure. I don't understand that a great deal. I do understand, of course, that he lost the property.

VT: Uh-huh, but he lost his father and grandfather (RW-N: Yes, when he was twelve?) When he was twelve. And he had to help his mother raise his siblings. And then he had to raise all of us. And most of us were girls. And he had a farm to run. (RW-N: Yes) And usually, you think of boys helping with the farm work. And I don't think that he wanted us to work as hard as we did. But there was not a choice. And I think a lot of the things that, his personality was, I want to put good citizens out here in this world. And this is my, the way that I see that I can do it.

RW-N: Was he overtly loving? How did he express-, he, he, must have, I guess, in some sense, expressed that he cared about you. He had rules and (VT: Mmm-hmm), and he, and he showed you those lessons that were important to him. Were there other ways in which he expressed that he cared about you?

VT: The, the ways that we saw the most were, when my brother came home, or when any of the children came home, or when there were big events in our lives, you would see him cry. But as far as telling you, and expressing himself, no.

RW-N: You weren't told that you were loved? He didn't kiss and hug you a lot? (VT: No) Did you kiss your parents before you went to bed at night? (VT: No) Mother?

VT: Mother, not father. (RW-N: Mother but not father) Mother sometimes. You know, it wasn't a...a ritual that we did that.

RW-N: Can you tell us a little bit more about your mother? Because your father, in some ways, seems more dominant in the home.

VT: He was more dominant in the home.

RW-N: But you certainly described her as very loving. (VT: Very) How would you interact with her? Was she more loving, in terms of...(VT: She was more loving) kissing, hugging, talking more, any ways...?

VT: Yeah, she was, you could sit down and talk to her. But, what she, the way that she conveyed it to us, was that the respect that we owed to our father. She caught herself teaching us to respect him. But uh, we could sit down with her, and we could joke with her and that kind of thing. And there were times that we could joke with my father. You could tell when there were not pressing problems on his mind. If there were pressing problems on his mind, then he was...a little bit more distant, and when the problems were less pressing.... Like now that there's a dry season, and we knew that he knew that the crops were not going to do what he needed to do, and there were gonna be financial problems later on, you could tell when he was stressed. And I think that's what it was. That was his way of showing stress. And my mother was just not that stressed. So, she could do that.

RW-N: Uh, why was your mother not that stressed? I mean, why do you perceive it that way?

VT: I...

RW-N: Because she, too, had, had to, she didn't have first worry about finances?

VT: Number one, she came from a very loving family, so she knew how to show love. (RW-N: uh-huh) Now, I think my father did not know how to show it. I'm sure he had it, but I'm not sure he knew how to show it. So, that made the difference with her.

RW-N: When you look back on your father and you—if there are some things that he could have done better, what would they be? I'm, I'm talking about with regard to the children? Would he have been more loving, wh-,?

VT: He could have uh, expressed his love a little bit more.

RW-N: To make him perfect. [chuckling]

VT: Mmm-hmm.

RW-N: What about your mother? What are, are the things that really are outstanding about her in your mind? Uh, and what are the things that she could have improved on a little bit?

VT: She could have been more assertive. [chuckle]

RW-N: She could have been more assertive?

VT: Mmm-hmm. (RW-N: Uh-huh) That is what I think that, that she could have improved, yeah, improved on. Because I can remember telling her that my husband will not do these things to me, and that meant not allow her to have a say. She just, you know, kind of, okay. (RW-N: She went along?) Mmm-hmm. And uh, fixing his meals. She would cook three meals a day.

AB: What do you mean, big meals?

VT: Mmm-hmm, big meals. And we were old enough to cook. And then we convinced her, that you don't have to do all of this work. We can do some of this work.

RW-N: So she worked very hard too?

VT: In the home. Yes, she worked very hard in the home. But three meals a day, no; I will, I will not fix three meals a day for a able-bodied person.

RW-N: So she did a lot of hard work for the family, for him. Waited on him? (VT: Mmm-hmm) More than what you thought was necessary?

VT: Much more than what I'm doing. (RW-N: much more) Much more than what I'm doing. But then, that was not typical of our family, just our family. I have seen lots of southern women do that for southern men.

RW-N: But you were aware of that when you were quite young? Or...yes, even when you were in the home, you were aware of that. (VT: Right) Uh...so what we're really talking about here are relationships between the genders. (VT: right) In growing up, you were aware of...(VT: I was aware of that)...some kind of...can I label that inequality?

VT: Oh, yes!

RW-N: Okay, so I'm not putting words in your mouth?

VT: No, no, no. I would be first to say that. But that is typical of most of the men in Louisiana that I know. (RW-N: Mmm-hmm) And I kind of blame it on the state, too. Because they say that whatever a woman brings to the marriage, it belongs to the man. Uh...yes. And that is one of the reasons that I said I would not marry a man from Louisiana. (RW-N: Mmm-hmm) Because I did not think that that was what I call equal, or fair.

RW-N: Do you think your mother and father loved each other?

VT: Oh, yeah. Mmm-hmm.

RW-N: Do you think they respected each other?

VT: I do. I think he respected her for the things that she did. And she respected him for the things that he did. Yes, I do think that they. . .

AB: Do you think they were happy? Do you think your mother was a happy woman?

VT: I think she was happy with her children. And she, she dearly loved my husband-, my, my father, so, I really think she was happy. I'm probably looking through my eyes that, in that situation.

AB: My husband tells me I do that all the time.

VT: Mmm-hmm. I would not have been. But I think she was.

RW-N: My husband tells me a story that one time after he was grown, he said to his mother, "I don't know how you can let father treat you that way." And she said, "Don't you dare talk like that about your father."

VT: Yes, my mother has told me that. (RW-N: that captures what you're saying) The one thing that I think that she regrets is that she didn't learn how to drive. And she had to depend on him for, you know, until we got older, some of us got old enough to drive. Consequently, she made each of us get our drivers license on our 15th birthday. That was our...

RW-N: And there was no objection?

VT: No, no. I have a sister now who hates to drive. But on her 15th birthday, she got her drivers license because my mother said, "You will not be in a position where you have to wait for your husband to take you some place."

AB: What about handling money? Did your mother get to handle any of the family finances, any of the money at all?

VT: Uh, my mother made her own money from selling milk, butter, and eggs. That was her money. Uh, my father took care of the family money. And she had her money from this.

RW-N: What did she do with her money?

VT: Gave it to us. [laughter] Most of the time she did. Uh...

AB: But she had a measure of independence with the money.

VT: With that money, she did.

RW-N: Uh...I forgot what I wanted to ask. I had a great question; I forgot what it was. [chuckle]

VT: I was gonna tell you of another incident; I've forgotten it, also.

RW-N: Well, if it comes to you at any time, (VT: uh-huh) regardless of what we're talking about, be sure that.... I don't have a very good sense of uh, your childhood friends. They...you talked earlier about the one family, a white family in the neighborhood, and you obviously played with those kids? (VT: Yes, we played with those kids mainly because...) Were there lots of kids in your neighborhood? (VT: Yes) Was it mostly those kids that you played with?

VT: No, no, no, no. Those were the ones who lived closer to us. (RW-N: yes, mmm-hmm) The next house down there, that was a family of twelve. Uh, around the corner was a family of 18, I believe. So, we had, there was an abundance of children there. On the other end, my sister married into a family of 8, I believe. And another sister into a family of maybe 10. So, there were all big families there.

RW-N: So, if we went into your neighborhood, uh, say on a summer evening, would we see kids playing out on the street? Playing kick the can or whatever?

VT: Now, remember, we lived in a farm neighborhood. (RW-N: Yes) You would see, on a Sunday afternoon, you would see kids at our house...(RW-N: Playing baseball) playing ball and something like that.

RW-N: You had all these games that you played together?

VT: We played baseball a lot. But we weren't allowed to play cards. And that was another thing that I said to my dad, "I don't see anything at all wrong with playing cards." And he would say, "It's a sin." I said, "Okay, well, we all sin." And I would tell him, "When I'm in school, I play cards. Now, I'm sorry, I will respect you, and I won't play them in front of you, since that's the way you feel about it. But I don't see anything wrong with it." But yes, we, we would walk, and on church,

after church on Sundays, almost every Sunday somebody would come home with me and stay until the evening service. And then we would go back to the evening service, and they would go home with their parents. And I would do that with other kids sometimes. But yes, we had a large uh, choir at church, we had uh, the young peoples' organization at church. And, and just in the neighborhood... And we would walk from my house, by the Kennedy's, around to the Newell's, and then they would come back and walk by the Kennedy's and back up to the house. And we would, we would just walk that circle sometimes three times.

AB: What about holidays? How were they celebrated in your home and your community?

VT: We did not, I've never been, had never been trick-or-treating. Uh, that was not a big thing. Uh, not even in town, that I remember.

AB: Did you have pumpkins and did you do jack-o-lanterns (VT: No) and anything like that?

VT: We didn't raise pumpkins and we didn't do jack-o-lanterns. Uh...

AB: So Halloween was just not a, a thing at your community?

VT: Was not a thing. Thanksgiving was a big thing at our house. Uh, the older ones would come home. I have—oh, excuse me—one brother and two sisters in California. I have three sisters in Illinois. I had one brother and two sisters in Texas. And one brother, two sisters in Louisiana, and one sister in Atlanta, and I'm here.

RW-N: All your siblings are alive?

VT: No, I lost two brothers and a sister, two of them just this year. (RW-N: Mmm-hmm) Yeah. And it seems to be the teachers.

AB: Maybe that says something about the stress of teaching. [laughter] So, they all came home for Thanksgiving?

VT: Not all of them, but many of them came home at Thanksgiving.

RW-N: So that was a festive time?

VT: Uh-huh.

RW-N: Did you do anything else at Thanksgiving when you were children? Let me tell you specifically what I'm thinking of. When I was a kid, and I was reared on Long Island, we went, what the kids now call trick-or-treating. We went what we called begging; we dressed up in beggars' costumes, and went from house to house asking for food. (AB: At Thanksgiving?) At Thanksgiving. We had no trick-or-treating on Long Island at that time. My grandkids don't believe this. Until the other grandmother reported it to them, too. [chuckling] And they began to.... Did you do anything like that?

VT: No. We didn't do anything like that.

AB: I never heard of it, Rita.

VT: I never heard of that, either. [laughter]

RW-N: It's not a figment of my imagination.

AB: So, what was Christmas like in your family?

VT: Christmas was the later years. The earlier years uh, we got toys, but we didn't make a big deal of Christmas because Christmas was Jesus' birthday. And that's as we were raised.

AB: Did you have a Christmas tree?

VT: We had a Christmas tree one time. And the neighbor's house caught fire from a Christmas tree, so, we kind of...no, not.

RW-N: So other people, though, had Christmas trees?

VT: Mmm-hmm. The later years, after we, you know, kind of got over that, we did. We had a

Christmas tree when the grandchildren would come. And we would celebrate Christmas with grandchildren.

RW-N: Do you have a sense of when you, when you were growing up, what sense did you have about how well off the family was? Obviously at one time you lost your house. (VT: uh-huh) Did you have any sense of having as much as what other people have, or being poorer than other people or richer than other people?

VT: I . . . thought that we were poor, until I looked back. And we were probably the first people in the neighborhood to get a tractor. Uh, we got a new vehicle before other people. Uh, and the reason that I thought that we were poor is because we didn't waste money, we didn't have money to waste. We never needed anything. We always had adequate clothing, shoes, food, uh . . . everything that we need-, needed . But there were not excesses.

RW-N: Yes, so there was, so when a child needed something, it was something (VT: It was. . .) you got if then.

VT: We got it. Uh, and we got things for Christmas, an outfit, or when we were younger, I can remember getting tea sets and things like that. But I didn't think of us as well off. Until I got older, older, and we could look back on it. We were probably, we were better off than most of our neighbors.

RW-N: But your perceptions were somewhat in the other direction when you were a child?

VT: Mmm-hmm, yeah.

RW-N: Did that make you unhappy?

VT: Uh, no, because I was in the same boat with everybody else. I didn't think that we were poorer than everybody else. I just thought that we were all poor.

AB: That's black and white?

VT: Mmm-hmm, yeah. I don't remember my friends getting a whole lot more than I got. Except the lady next door sewed, and she loved to sew. So her children had more clothing than we did. My mother sewed, but it wasn't a hobby for her. But it was a hobby for this lady. And she, every holiday her kids had, you know, clothing. But she would work in the middle of the night to get those things on her children. So, no, I didn't think that we were rich. I just thought that was, everybody was poor.

RW-N: When you look back on yourself as a child, how would you describe yourself? Before you did describe yourself as pretty much going along with (VT: Mmm-hmm) the rules of home, until you got away to college. Uh, how else would you describe yourself as a child? I mean, let me just—happy, sad, worried, depressed, uh, exuberant?

VT: I wasn't exuberant. I have always been quiet, (RW-N: Quiet, yes) very quiet. (RW-N: Mmm-hmm) I used to read a lot. (RW-N: Mmm-hmm) Uh, my sister said that I was twelve years old before I even talked to her. [chuckles] But that was because there were other people in the home. And I have sisters, I have two sisters who can talk to each other non-stop at the same time and answer [each other's] questions. And I have always been amazed by that. And I think my mind was more open. . . watching that, (RW-N: Yes) than I was talking.

RW-N: So, you were a quieter child?

VT: I was very quiet. And probably a loner. Because I could go into my room with a book and the radio, and didn't. . .

RW-N: And did you have your own room? Because there were a lot of children. (VT: When uh. . .) You shared with one or two others?

VT: After the house-, in '57, when the house burned, there were only three of us at home. (RW-N: Yes) Uh, Mamie, who's older than I am, and Maxine, who's younger than I am. We built a three-bedroom home then. A bedroom for our parents, a big bedroom with two double beds in it, and the other bedroom. The two double beds were supposed to be for the two younger, Maxine and I. And the other bedroom was supposed to be for Mamie, but Mamie did not want to be over there by herself. And I loved it. So I had my own room, and the two of them shared.

RW-N: What kinds of things did you read when you were a child?

VT: Uh, love stories.

RW-N: Did your mother and father know you were reading love stories?

VT: Well, they just knew I was reading novels.

AB: And they didn't object? (VT: No)

RW-N: And you got the books from where?

VT: Uh, there was a family that lived not too far from us, who knew that I liked to read. And they would just drop off bags of books.

RW-N: Give 'em to you? (VT: Mmm-hmm) You borrow-, no, they just had a lot of books that they gave you?

VT: Yes. The mother in that home loved to read. And she, I think my mother might have ironed for her. . . or something.

AB: This was a white family?

VT: Mmm-hmm, this was a white family. And she would bring the books by.

RW-N: So your mother might have done some small amount of domestic work (VT: mmm-hmm) . . . as well? (VT: She would iron for them.) Cause you said before, she didn't work outside the

home.

VT: She didn't work outside the home. [Clothes for ironing were brought to our house] so she did do some domestic work, uh-huh.

RW-N: And was that money her money, too?

VT: Mmm-hmm, yeah, that was her money.

AB: Was there a public library in your town?

VT: For white people.

AB: But you black kids could not go? What about your school? Did it have a library?

VT: I cannot remember a librarian when I was in elementary school. I'm trying to think, at the, yes, at the high school I think we did.

AB: So you could check books out of that library and take them home?

VT: Mmm-hmm, yeah, if you wanted to.

RW-N: Do you remember as a child, or as an adolescent, thinking of what you would like to be when you grew up? (VT: I. . .) Did you have any special dreams of those kinds of things?

VT: Mmm-hmm. I remember dreaming of having a husband that would treat me like I wanted to be treated, and a job that I was good at. Now, what kind of job, I did not have a specific job in mind at that time. I really didn't know what I wanted to be at that time. But I just wanted a husband who was gonna treat me like I wanted to be treated. And I found one. (AB chuckles) And I never pictured a house in that. (RW-N: mmm-hmm) I do not like housework. I do not like to cook. I do not like to do anything that has to do with the house. I think that's because I just wiped that out of my mind. But I wanted a job that I was good at, and a husband that treated me like I wanted to be treated.

AB: Could we back up for a moment to uh, your church and school again? Were there any opportunities for you to be in plays, or anything like that? (VT: Yes, mmm-hmm) Did you do that at church as well?

VT: Every holiday we did. We had a program for Thanksgiving and. . .[someone in background saying "Hello."] Hi!

AB: Is this your husband?

VT: That's my husband.

AB: How do you do, sir? (Mr.. Tyman: Fine. How are you?) I think I talked with you on the phone. I'm Ancella Bickley. How are you? (Mr. Twyman: Fine) And this is my colleague, Rita. [VT also introducing RW-N] (RW-N: Hi) (Mr. Twyman: Hi) Nice to meet you. Are we interfering with your dinner time?

MR. TWYMAN: No, No. No, I just eat anytime.

VT: They are getting my life story. They are...

MR. TWYMAN: They gonna print it? [all laughing]

AB: Well, she isn't telling us any really lurid details, so we'll have to. . . .

[VT offers refreshment and a refreshment break is taken]

We were talking about Mrs. Twyman's experiences at school. Ms. Twyman, you were saying that [interruption]. . . you were saying that sometimes girls would slip out of the dorm at night, when you were in Grambling.

VT: Yeah, they would slip out the back door. And uh, they knew if they got caught, they were gonna be sent home. And I felt that if you knew that, and you wanted to go bad enough, you were gonna find a way to go. And rather than have them stay out there all night, if they knocked on my window,

I would open the door for them, provided that they knew the consequences before they left. So, I wasn't interested in going out there. I . . . coming up under my father's rules, I could have gone wild when I went to school. But I didn't. There was those things that he said I shouldn't do, I wasn't interested in doing at that time. So, I pretty well followed all of the rules. When, at curfew, I was in the room. We had study hour from seven to nine every Monday through Friday nights. And I studied.

RW-N: And what year was this that you started college?

VT: 1960. (RW-N: Yes) Uh-huh.

AB: Was there any drinking in your community?

VT: There were some people in my community that I consider alcoholics. Uh, and you know, there were uncles who came to the house and their bottles were there, but we had no way of knowing they were there. They were out in the shed. And every once in a while, they would go to the shed. (AB: chuckle) And we didn't know what they were going for until much later.

RW-N: And your father did not drink?

VT: No. He did not drink.

RW-N: Nor your mother?

VT: No, my mother didn't drink. I can remember that I was born with a kidney problem. And the doctor said drink beer. Now, I was in college at the time, and I brought this beer home and I knew if my dad found it in the refrigerator, he was gonna go ballistic. So, I came in and I said, "This is my medication." [laughing] And I, I did drink it. And then I, it got to the point that I did not like it, maybe because it was uh, medicine. But I had had beer before then. It wasn't something that was foreign to me. I did not do anything that I considered wrong. Some of the things he considered

wrong, I didn't consider wrong, and I did those. But the far out things, I, I didn't do.

AB: Did you work while you were in college?

VT: No, I didn't. I went home in the summer and at the time, my dad said, "You can do two ways. You need money to go back to school. You can work here and I will give you a hundred dollars when you get ready to go back to school. Or I will pay you the wages that I pay the other people who work for me." I chose the wages, because I knew I would make more. So, I made my money like that, working on the farm. He would pay me as if—at the same rate that he paid the other people who worked for him.

RW-N: But the farm was one of the reasons why you wanted to leave home?

VT: The farm was. . .

RW-N: You just disliked that kind of work?

VT: I did, that was too hard of work.

RW-N: It was hard?

VT: It was very hard work. And the sun was hot. And I just did not like it. And after I got married and moved here, it was three years before I would plant a flower. I would not plant a flower.
[chuckling]

AB: Now, when you finished Grambling then, did you find a job immediately?

VT: When I finished Grambling, that following summer I went to Tuskegee Institute for the summer. And..., no, I got out of Grambling in January, and I substituted then. Then I went to Tuskegee in the summer. And the, the way that I got a job was my college professor was contacted, and the superintendent was looking for a special education teacher. And the college professor recommended me. Uh, he called my mother, and my mother called me and told me to call. And I didn't call and

I didn't call and I didn't call, because I thought I wanted a break. So, my mother called [chuckles] and made me an appointment for me to go for an interview. And I went for an interview and one of the other girls at the school had gotten the job. And I was so happy. [chuckle] I said, "Well, you've already filled the job, so I'll just go on back home." And he said, "No, I think I want you." And I said, "But the job is already filled." And he said, "Well, I will call Miss Valley, and tell her that..." because he said, "I told her when she came that I had an interview pending." And I said, "Are you speaking of Laura Lee Valley?" And he said, "Yes." That was my rival in school. [machine beeping, end of tape] So, I got the job.

AB: She had gone, she had been a classmate at, at Grambling?

VT: She had been a classmate at Grambling of mine. And, she and I did not really get along. I didn't dislike her, but she seemed to have disliked me. And I really don't know why. She was one of these people who I thought had more than we had, and she kind of flaunted it. And uh, that was my way of getting back at her. And I think that's why I took the job, really. [laughs]

AB: When you went to Tuskegee, was that to do graduate work? (VT: Mmm-hmm) And were you in special education all through that period, or uh, was that something that came later?

VT: I went just that summer. Yes, I was in special ed; I started in special ed when I was in Grambling. When I went to Grambling, I had no idea what I wanted to major in. I had no idea what I wanted to do. And, you know how the courses are by alphabet, you pick your courses by your last name? Well, my last name was W, Wagner. When I got there, all the good courses were gone. So, I ended up with Psychology of Special Children, and uh, Mental Retardation and stuff like that. I had to have some courses so I took them, having no idea what this was all about because at that time I had never heard of special education. Well, we got into class and Dr. Carter started explaining to us--

because there were other kids in there who did not want to be in there either. He said, "What in the world is this?" So, he said, "Can you remember when you were in elementary school, there were kids who sat in the back that the teacher just did not have time for, and those kids kind of faded out of school?" And immediately I could remember those. And he said, "Special education is a way to teach those children. You need to teach them differently, you need to repeat for them, you need to have patience with them, and you need a small group of kids, working a lot one-on-one." That was exactly what I needed. I was a loner, I was quiet, I could work with one child at a time. And that's when my interests started. And I took all the courses that I could in special education. (RW-N: From then on?) From then on. And...

AB: No regrets?

VT: No regrets. And I will be starting my 34th year teaching special education in September.

RW-N: So, when you uh, started your teaching job in Louisiana and taught there for... three years?

(VT: Mmm-hmm) Then you moved to West Virginia and continued teaching? (VT: Right) So essentially your work history is working on a farm (VT: Uh-huh) and becoming a teacher?

VT: Right. I've never done anything else.

AB: Were there any sort of teacher role models or so from your high school? Anybody that made uh, the kind of impression where you just said, "I wanna grown up and be like them"?

VT: Uh, yes, they were all very good. My second grade teacher dressed very well. I mean, she was a fashion plate. Uh, but I think the one that has the most substance for me is our 11th grade English teacher. She was from Mississippi. And she said when you go out into the world, people should not know where you came from when you open your mouth. So she made us lose that southern drawl. And she said, "Say your words, and people will not know that you're from Louisiana as soon you

open your mouth.” And I think that had the greatest impression on me than anything else.

RW-N: Why? I mean, you did not want to sound like you had come...

VT: Because nobody else had told us that you really are not talking. We didn't realize that southern drawl was leaving the ends of your words off. And saying your vowels a little bit differently from what they were, and that's when we learned to talk.

AB: I was going to comment on your, your language; I would never have known that you were from Louisiana.

END OF TAPE 1 - SIDE 2 BEGIN TAPE 2 - SIDE 1

RW-N: This is July 13th. This is tape number two with Mrs. Twyman. So, the things that you have just said, about who made an impression on you, were teachers who dressed in a particular way, a teacher who drew your attention to that you might improve your speech (VT: mmm-hmm). That seems to say in some way that you were looking to improve yourself in some way, so that these things might be important to you.

VT: They all taught us to be the best that we could be. Uh, the others, all of them were, you know, they taught you well. So, that was not—I wasn't impressed by that, because that was an automatic thing. (RW-N: Mmm-hmm) Uh, these were the things that stood out, these were the things that were going to get you some place in the world, as far as I was concerned. But the basic education, you got from all of them. The basic items you got from all of them. Uh...

RW-N: So, you might get some place in the world, and get away from the farm, (VT: Uh-hmm) either by going into the service or by going off to college. (VT: Right) Tell us a little bit about what you said before about your parents both put your education first. What, what did they convey to you about that? What did education mean to them?

VT: Education to them was you would become a citizen who could take care of yourself. And they, they all, they wanted all of us to be self-reliant. They did not want us to have to rely on anyone else. That was important to them. And most black people from the south thought that education was really, really important. Mainly because they didn't get it. And they pushed us. And they, they really wanted us to have it. All of us graduated high school. All fourteen of us graduated high school. And probably all of us would have gone on to college had resources allowed that.

AB: Can we back up for a moment and, and talk about language again, because uh my daughter just sent me something about ebonics on the computer yesterday. Uh, what do you, what do you think about uh language usage among black kids now? Because you teach special education, but I'm sure you, you come in contact with the other kids now. What, what do you think about that?

VT: I think that they should be taught the proper way. And then if they choose to talk that way, that's fine with me. Uh, I don't always speak exactly the way that I was taught to speak. I kid around and I use some ebonics. But the placement of that is important. And I don't see anything wrong with, with slangs if kids are using them among themselves, too. And there are white people that use slangs, also. And when I say kids, I mean all kids use it among themselves, as long as they know the proper way to do it, and the proper places.

AB: So your self-concept or so wasn't damaged by your teacher correcting you?

VT: Oh, no, no. Uh, she was the kind of person who, everything she did, she did to make us better. She never let us know that we were not already good. But this was her way of, it was a part of her English course—that's the way that she put it. And I, I, since I've been here, I have written her and I have told her that. I have lost contact with her since then. But I think she was my favorite teacher. And that's not the only reason. I can't sing two notes. And she let me be in the choir. I mean, I was

too embarrassed to try out. There's no way that I could have got up there and sang by myself in front of people. So, what she did was, she had everybody thinking that I sang to her alone. I can't sing. But she knew that all of my friends were in that choir. So, I was in that choir, too. And I was up there, and she did teach me to sing some. But the way that she taught me was that she would sing it first and I would sing it. I cannot sing to piano music, and people in church wonder why. When Mrs. Reeler is in church, Mrs. Reeler has a beautiful voice. [This probably refers to a neighbor, another teacher who was interviewed for this project.] When she is in church, I can sing, because I can hear her. I don't care what the piano is saying, what the organ is saying, I cannot follow that. Mainly because when Mrs. Austin was teaching us music—she was the music teacher and the English teacher—we did not have books so that we could see the notes. The way that she taught us the song is she sang it and we sang it. So, we learned auditorily. I can't read music, as such. I'm trying to teach myself to play piano now. Because from playing the drum, I can count the rhythm. But reading the notes.... And that was because we did not have the material. Had we had the material, I'm sure she would have taught us to do that. And she was just an all-around wonderful person. She was about four feet tall, about as big as my finger, full of energy. And she, she made everybody feel that they were the best they could be, or she told them how they could be the best.

RW-N: Now, what grade was this again?

VT: Eleventh grade.

RW-N: Eleventh grade. (VT: Mmm-hmm) And was there anyone in college, any of your professors who particularly stand out? Obviously, this Professor Taylor really-(VT: Carter, Dr. Carter) Carter, sorry, (VT: yeah) uh kind of directed you almost immediately, right, unbeknownst to him?

VT: Right, uh-huh.

RW-N: Uh, did he continue to be important to you?

VT: Uh, yes, he was. He did. When I came to West Virginia, in West Virginia, in order to be certified in special education, you had to have gone through a West Virginia college, which didn't have any special education courses. Now, that never made sense to me. In order to be certified here, I had to go back through Dr. Carter. He would go through the courses that I had taken, compare them with West Virginia courses, and I have a letter from him now, telling the state of West Virginia that I should be certified in the state of West Virginia. And he got my certification for me here. Also, in the state of West Virginia, unless they've changed in the last couple of months, in order for me to get a master's degree in special education, I will have to do student teaching. And I refuse to do that. They call it practicum. I refuse to do that. And I have enough hours for it but I, I just refuse to do that, because—and I think that's my father coming out in me: If you believe in something, believe in it. And I, when I came here, I asked, "Well, how did anybody else in this state become certified, if you don't have the courses in your college?" They said, "Well, everybody else came from out of state." "Oh, I came from out of state, too. So tell me how to get the certification." And that's when they told me to contact Dr. Carter. And he certified me that way.

RW-N: So right now, you hold a bachelor of science...in education (VT: In education), special education? (VT: special education) You have done...

VT: Special education, elementary education and I can teach English from first through ninth grade.

RW-N: And you have done much work toward a master's degree?

VT: I attended Tuskegee Institution, George Washington University, West Virginia University, Louisiana S-, Northeast Louisiana State University, all graduate courses. But I do not have a master's degree.

RW-N: And you have about thirty credits or so it sounds?

VT: Thirty-nine.

RW-N: Thirty-nine credits. (VT: mmm-hmm) And you are now a certified special education teacher in West Virginia?

VT: Yes, mmm-hmm.

AB: Do you have any black students?

VT: I do now. I have three, I had three last year. There have been years that I didn't, many, many years, that I didn't have. But the last year I had three. In the last four years, I think I have had some black students.

RW-N: Now, in Louisiana, did you- those three years you taught, was all of that at the same school?

VT: All of that was at the same school.

RW-N: What is that school?

VT: Vernon Parish, it's called Vernon Parish High School.

RW-N: Vernon, V-e-r-(VT: n-o-n). And that was at the high school that you taught special education?

VT: It was one whole school. And it was named for a high school, Vernon Parish High School. But it went first through twelfth.

RW-N: So your students were of what age?

VT: I had students ranging from age to 7, from 7 to 21. I had 21 students one year. I was 22 years old. My oldest student was 21. I had no help, I had no materials.

AB: Those were all black students?

VT: All black students. When I went to Vernon Parish and asked them what my responsibilities were

as a special ed teacher—I'm a beginning teacher. I know what I have learned in college. I had done student teaching. At that time, we did student teaching, all of us had to do student teaching with one class at the college elementary school, because there were not any classes out there for us to do student teaching. I did student teaching in first grade, and student teaching with special education students. So, I asked the superintendent and the principal, what are my duties. They said, "We don't know, you're the special ed teacher." So, I'm going in blind, not knowing exactly what to do, having to ask them to get the materials that I thought I needed. Uh...so...

AB: They were all white? The superintendent?

VT: The superintendent was all white. The principal was not.

RW-N: The school was for black children?

VT: The school was for black children.

RW-N: But the principal was...and the principal was...

VT: Was black. The principal was black, the superintendent was white. Uh,

RW-N: What did you do it?

AB: Prayed a lot. [chuckle]

VT: Called Dr. Carter.

RW-N: You called Dr. Carter?

VT: Mmm-hmm. And he told me the test to get, and I tested the kids. That time, at that time, special education was a dumping ground for any child who didn't fit in a regular classroom. So, I, for the first year, I took it. For the second year, I took it. And the third year, I started, you know, telling them what it was all about and testing the kids, for them to come in.

Now, my real reason for coming here, and I think somebody asked me that earlier, that at that

time, in Louisiana, special education teachers got their nine-months salary. [clock chiming] And they got one other check, equal to one month's salary, for teaching special ed. I wasn't aware of this. Some of my co-workers were in a meeting where the superintendent said that his special education teachers got ten months' pay for nine months' work. I confronted him. And...

RW-N: Because you had never gotten it?

VT: I had never gotten it.

AB: You were getting nine months' pay for nine months' work.

VT: I was getting nine months' pay for nine months' work.

AB: You were the only black teacher?

VT: I'm the only black teacher. So, he was speaking of his white teacher, who was getting ten months pay. I went to the principal, and told him that I thought this was going on. And I asked him to check with the superintendent. He checked with the superintendent; the superintendent kind of told him, don't let me come to the office. So....

RW-N: How do you know that?

VT: Because when I asked for time to leave early to go to the office, the principal found a reason why I couldn't. (RW-N: Mmm-hmm) But the principal made a mistake and told me one time. At the time, my mother was in the hospital in Texas—she had cancer. And I went up to ask him if I could have that Friday off to go and see her. He said, "You are an adult. Don't ever put yourself in a position that anybody can tell you no, about anything." Okay, at the time I didn't realize what that meant to me. But, then, when I went up and asked him if I could go to the superintendent's office, he would always say something to keep me from going. So, I reminded him: I came today, and I am gonna tell you I am going; I'm not gonna let you tell me no; I am going. So, I went over and asked

for the superintendent. They told me he wasn't in. And I said, "Okay, I'm coming back at a certain time." Well, somehow the principal let me know what was going on. So this time I went over and I told the secretary that I wanted to see him. "He's not in." "Okay, his car is outside." "He's in a meeting." "Okay, I will be here by the time his meeting is over. I am not leaving until I see him." So, she went back and told him that. And I went in and I confronted him. Now, this is a black woman who really does not have tenure, telling this white superintendent that you have lied. And he told me that he didn't say it. And I said, "Okay." Anyway, I wrote to the state department. The state department said it was at his discretion, at the discretion of the superintendent. I went back and I said, "It is at your discretion. You have the opportunity to pay me." And in so many words he told me he wasn't. And I had my letter already ready. I said, "Do you want it now, or do you want me to mail it?" So, he said, "You better mail it, make it official." I went outside and mailed my letter of resignation, outside of his office, and I left.

RW-N: Was that at the end of the school year?

VT: It was near the end of the school year, mmm-hmm. (RW-N: yes)

AB: So, you finished out the year?

VT: I did. Uh-huh, yeah.

RW-N: And then you did, what? You came, oh, then you [inaudible; overlapping voices].

VT: I had already sent out letters, because I didn't think that was gonna fly. (RW-N: yes) I had letters sent out. And...

RW-N: Now, would you tell us where those letters were sent? Hawaii...

VT: Hawaii, uh, Alaska, Maryland, West Virginia.

RW-N: And why did you pick those particular places?

AB: Alaska, start with Alaska. Why did you do that? [chuckle]

VT: It just seemed like an exciting place to be. And Hawaii seemed like an exciting place to be.

RW-N: And, and Maryland was...

VT: Maryland was close to the district. West Virginia was close to the district. I thought I wanted to be near Washington, DC, for the cultural things that were there.

RW-N: Oh, you're talking-, when you say the district, you're talking about Washington, DC?

VT: Washington, DC, mmm-hmm, the District of Columbia.

RW-N: Yes, yes, okay.

VT: Uh, I sent one to Jefferson County and Berkeley County. And I had heard from Berkeley County, and Jefferson County called me. And I was more impressed with a call than a letter, so I told Mr. Lowrey I would come up for an interview. And I did.

RW-N: And who is this Mr. Lowrey? Would you spell his name for us?

VT: L-o-w-e-r-y. L-o-w-r-e-y, I think.

RW-N: And he was a sup...(VT: He was the superintendent here)...superintendent?

VT: Ted Lowrey. He was the superintendent for many, many years here.

AB: Did you...had you ever met anybody from West Virginia?

VT: I didn't even know where West Virginia was, except on the map. I looked on the map, and I looked up places close to Washington, DC. And I...

RW-N: So that I understand this, when you worked in Louisiana, were you living on your own, were you...how far away was it from your...?

VT: From my parents' house, it was 160 miles.

RW-N: So you really, after college, went out on your own, so to speak? Took an apartment? Lived

by yourself, or with others?

VT: I lived with one of the other teachers there. I had a room in one of the teacher's homes. (RW-N: Uh-huh) Uh...

RW-N: So you had three years of being independent in that way? (VT: Mmm-hmm) And then decided you would ...(VT: Venture out)...venture out (VT: uh-huh).

AB: Did you help the family out economically after you began to work? (VT: Yes, mmm-hmm) And you had an NDSL, you had to pay that back? Or was that a grant? [NDSL refers to National Defense Student Loan]

VT: Ah, I had to pay that back. I paid back more than I should have. Because, at that time, if you worked in an economically depressed area, you could pay—be exempt. And I paid four years, four [of] five years, before I learned that. And one of the teachers here told me that. And I was exempt for the fifth year. Yes, even when I was in college, I got enough money from the student loan that I sent money home to my mother. I always sent money home to my mother. And...

AB: Did you say your father died first, or your mother?

VT: My mother died first.

AB: And did your father continue to live on the farm, and...?

VT: He lived on the farm. My baby sister was working in Chicago at the time, and she came home and lived with him. Uh, she was trying to go to business school and take care of the house, and all of that. She had a child. And I was sending money home to her, too. So...

AB: Uh, from what you have said about your neighborhood, it seems as if there were a lot of intact families, with both parents in the home. Was that the case in your growing up years?

VT: I knew one home without a father. And this was in town. This was not in my, in our rural

neighborhood. And I knew one home without a mother. The mother had died, and the father was raising one of my classmates and her brother. And the mother where there was no father, I never knew what happened to him. But all of the families that I can remember were intact families. I cannot remember anybody in my church that there were not two-parent families. All up and down the road, I cannot remember. I'm trying to think of anybody who I can ever remember being divorced when I was young. I cannot remember. Now, I'm sure there were. But I just cannot remember.

RW-N: So let's go back to your venturing out. [VT: chuckle] Uh, you came to West Virginia because... West Virginia was among the first to answer your letters? (VT: Right) And the phone call (VT: phone call) impressed you more. (VT: mmm-hmm) You immed-, almost immediately then took a job that was offered?

VT: I came here, interviewed and took this job, yes.

RW-N: You were offered the job quickly?

VT: Uh, yes. Mmm-hmm.

RW-N: So, this happened between the end of one academic year in Louisiana, and the next autumn you went to work (VT: Mmm-hmm) in West Virginia?

VT: Yes, I got out of school there in May, and I moved up here and met some friends in Maryland in June. And then I moved here in June.

RW-N: So you had some friends in Maryland?

VT: Mmm-hmm.

AB: Those were schoolmates?

VT: No, these were people, these were friends of friends that I have known.

RW-N: Had you traveled much as a child?

VT: No.

RW-N: Does that mean almost practically none at all?

VT: Almost none. Only to relatives' houses and that kind of thing.

RW-N: Where did you move when you came to West Virginia? You came into one of these relatively small towns. (VT: Mmm-hmm) Is that right?

VT: There was a lady in Charles Town, uh, Alvin Tolbert's [a man known in the local black community] aunt, who took in teachers. And she said that she, she thought that she was gonna stop, she wasn't gonna take in any more. So, I came here and I had absolutely no place to live, because she said she wasn't going to take in any more. But his cousin was sitting on the porch, and she was an elderly lady—she's dead now—and she tried to talk Mrs. Greene into letting me stay there. So, she told me, "Come here," she said, "I see something in you. You come back next Tuesday. By that time I will have talked her into letting you stay here." [VT whispers this conversation] [AB: chuckle] And she had. When I came back next Tuesday, Mrs. Greene had changed her mind. And I moved in there. And...(RW-N: And so...I'm sorry, go ahead)...and I, Mrs. Greene died, and I even stayed in the house until I got married.

RW-N: How long a time was that now, that you lived there?

VT: It was four years, I believe.

RW-N: And you came to West Virginia, and you taught in what school?

VT: I taught in the old Page-Jackson school.

RW-N: Page-Jackson?

VT: Page-Jackson.

AB: Now, was it still segregated when you came?

VT: No, it was integrated by that time. (AB: It was integrated by that time.)

RW-N: And was this the first integrated school you had attended or taught in, is that right? (VT: Right) And what was the percentage of black students in that school at the time? I gathered from what you said before that it might have been small?

VT: I, I really could not say for sure. But my room, the special ed kids was a small uh....this school was situated in the black neighborhood, (RW-N: Yes) quote "black neighborhood" so, uh, I don't think there was bussing out.

RW-N: So, would you say it was mostly black, or half or...? Just some general ballpark estimate.

VT: I guess about a quarter. Because there are not that many black people in our...

RW-N: In the area you were in.

VT: Uh-huh.

AB: Page Jackson was the traditional black school in this area.

RW-N: Yes, but the black population is rather...(VT: rather small in the state of West Virginia) so about a quarter, something like that.

VT: I, I think. (RW-N: yes) Now, you're asking me to remember 30 years, which is not...[laughing]

RW-N: Um, so how was that? That was the first experience teaching white students, is that right? (VT: Right) And dealing with white parents? (VT: mmm-hmm) Dealing with other white teachers, a white principal? That was new, wasn't it?

VT: That was new to me. (RW-N: Yes) For some reason, I didn't...I have always felt that I was good at teaching. Maybe I shouldn't say that, but I just felt that way. And I didn't see that as a problem. There were problems with some parents. But I didn't let it become a problem. I can

remember one lady, and this was not my first year there. But she had had a crisis in her family. And she came down, she came to my room, crying. I mean, she was broken up.

RW-N: You're talking about another teacher, now?

VT: No, this was a parent. (RW-N: A parent) A parent. I don't remember what had happened. Had she lost somebody, or one of her children was really ill? Something. Anyway, I can remember putting my arms around her and consoling her. And all of a sudden, she thought about who I was, and she did one of these numbers. I just stepped back, and, and let her go.

AB: Mrs. Twyman has just described a movement away from her that one of her-, that a parent took when she discovered [realized] she was black; she dropped her arms and jumped back over from her.

RW-N: There were some of those incidences.

VT: Oh, yes, there were-, my problem was mostly with parents. And I can remember being in the grocery store and one of my students running up to me, and her mother in a strong voice saying, "Come here!" And there was another time in the grocery store, one of my kids saw me and said, "Mom, Mom"—at that time I was Miss Wagner—"There's Miss Wagner." The mother said-, never turned one way or the other.

AB: Was that the first time you think that the parents learned that you were a black teacher? Do you think that the kids—had they [meaning the parents] been informed, or was it...?

VT: I'm pretty sure that they, they knew that I was black. They had not met me as such. Uh...

RW-N: And this parent wasn't about to, in that sort of a sense, no.

VT: No. And I can remember another child, whose, I won't mention his name. But I still remember his name. His parents would let him drive a car, but he was only 9 years old. I mean, he could do anything that he wanted to do. And I was teaching some lesson, and it came up that you needed to

have driver's license, or something. And he [said], "I don't have a driver's license." And I said, "Well, you just drive on the farm, don't you?" "No, I drive into town." Okay. And I said, "If you get caught, your parents are gonna be in trouble." So, he went home and told his parents that I said he was gonna be in trouble-, they were gonna be in trouble. They sent me word that I could not tell them what to do with their son. And I could not tell their son what to do. "I'm not trying to tell you what to do outside of the classroom. As long as you follow the rules inside the classroom, I have no qualms with that." Then he was one who made sure that this black teacher was not going to be able to tell him anything.

AB: How old did you say he was?

VT: Nine.

AB: He was nine, he was driving? A vehicle at nine years old?

VT: He was driving a vehicle at nine years old. So, you know, if they allowed that, there wasn't much that any adult could tell him. And he gave me a pretty hard time. But then, he was moving away, and he came in with these gold-plated steak knives, and he said, "These are for you." I said, "Wait, you take these home and give them to your mother, because I'm sure your mother did not send those to me." "She told me I could bring them and give them to you." "I will not accept them until you go home and give them back to your mother." The mother wrote me a note and said, "He said he wanted to give them to you, they are yours." Wow! So there were crises like that. (RW-N: Yes)

AB: Have they gotten, have they changed over the years?

VT: Oh, yes. Yes, they've changed over the years.

AB: In what respect?

VT: I think parents have accepted the fact that there are black teachers. And believe it or not, children don't perceive you as being black, because you're nice. I did not realize that. I, we have Special Olympics, and my students go to Special Olympics. They have a buddy who comes and meets them, and the buddy meets them at the bus and stays with them all that day. This particular child would not go with the buddy. And I could not understand that. And I finally got him to tell me why. I said, "Why don't, what's wrong..." he was not a problem to me. "What is wrong with her?" I think he kicked her or something and she brought him back to me, and I said, "Okay, I will not ask you to keep him under those circumstances." And I took him over and I said, "What's the problem with her?" "She's brown." I put my arm up, I said, and I put it next to his, "What color am I?" And you could see his eyes light up like that, as if, "Oh." So, I was on the table, was keeping scores. So, I did not have a buddy for him, and to make sure that he was safe, I had to keep him with me. So, he went home and told his mother that he didn't have very much fun that day. And she came in to see why. And I explained to her, and she said, "Oh, he's not used to brown people." He's been in my room two years and he's not used to brown people, I, I don't...see that. And that's when it dawned on me, that if you're nice to kids, they don't see you as black. They just see you as a nice person. So, very few students do I have problems with. It's the, it was the parents most of the time. And now, there are not very many parents that I have a problem with.

AB: What about your colleagues at school? Your white colleagues?

VT: Overtly, I don't have any problem. There are some that are, are...sincere, and there are some that [at times let] you know that you are black.

AB: Is that still the case now, 1997?

VT: That is still the case now, 1997. That is still the case. Uh...and some of the time, I'm not real

sure that even they are aware of what they are doing.

RW-N: Can you give us some example of some of these times?

VT: Mmm, I'm trying to think.... I can remember an incident, there was a book that was, somebody had brought in a bag of books. And you were reading a book, and I said, "When you get done with that book, I would really would like to read it." You got done with the book, you came in, I'm sitting here, you ask her if she wanted to read the book. Now, both of you knew that I had asked for the book. Now, can I say why? I don't know if that was why, or if that was just.... And there, there are other things that I...you feel it.... And to keep from, keep the anger from coming up, I purposely wipe it. I, I choose not to remember those things.

END OF TAPE 2- SIDE 1 (and the first interview)

BEGIN TAPE 3- SIDE 1 (second interview, July 15, 1997)

RW-N: . . . Velma Twyman, Ancella Bickley, Rita Wicks-Nelson, doing the interviews. Uh, Mrs. Twyman, you mentioned to us, that since we have seen you the last time, you have been thinking a little bit more about your mother and about some of the things in your childhood that you'd like to share with us. Would you begin on that?

VT: Okay. What I remember most about my mother, I think, was the way that she would wake us up in the morning. Before we went to school, we had to go out and milk the cows. And she would come and she would wake each one of us up, and tell us something that would start our day in a, on a positive note. And we'd have to get up and go and milk the cows, and then come back and get dressed for school.

RW-N: You mean she would deliberately do that? (VT: Yes) Can you give me an example of that?

VT: Oh, say I had a test that day, and she would come in and said-, say, "Now you have a test today. We both know you studied last night, so, it's gonna be okay. You're gonna do well on the test." And maybe something else was gonna happen to another sister, and something else was gonna happen to another sister. But she, that was her personal time with us. And then, later on, as we got older, she would get up and she would go out and milk the cows first, and then come back and wake us up. Uh. . . she became ill, uh, and we didn't really know what was wrong. But we knew there were times that she would have to go back to bed. She said that she had a headache and she would have to go back to bed. And uh, she, she left me before I was ready for her to leave me. She. . . always said that she wanted to wait until her children were grown, wanted to live until her children were grown. And she, at that time, she had no idea that she was ill. And she said that, "I just pray that I live until my children are grown." And I can remember her saying be careful what you pray for, because you might get it. (RW-N: mmm-hmm) And the baby was 19 when she died. And I didn't have any children, I wasn't married at the time. And I can remember her telling me that, "I'm leaving you worse off than any of them. You can't sew, you can't cook, you're not thinking about getting married." (RW-N: uh-huh) And so, I stayed at the hospital with her at night, and the other sisters took turns during the day. I mean, I stayed during the day, and they took turns during the night. And I went home that day, and I stayed a little bit later than I normally do because my sister said, "Okay, I'm gonna stay a little bit later," and when I came back, she was gone. And I've, I've just never gotten over that. I. . .you know. . . . But the special thing was the way that she woke us up in the morning and sent us out on a positive note. That I dearly loved. And when she combed our hair, that was our time with her. And uh, I had very long, very thick hair. And it hurt every time she combed my hair. So, when school was out, on Monday mornings she would send me and another sister two

doors down. And Mrs. Marylou Williams would take a nylon stocking and cut it into strips. And she would wrap my hair, similar to the braids that kids are wearing now. And that would stay in until Saturday afternoon. And then they would take it out and we would get ready for church on Sunday. And the next Monday morning it would go back in. That way, my hair, my head wasn't hurt when she combed it every day.

AB: Washing your hair must have been a trip. [laughter]

VT: That was a trip. That was a trip. I had to get ready for that. And that was a three or four hour job. And you had to comb my hair while it was wet. If you waited until it got dry, you had to wet it again, or else, you could not comb it. But uh, and I think you asked me about uh, Grambling. Grambling was one of the best teachers college in the nation at the time. And that I was very pleased at going to Grambling. And you were asking me about the sororities; no, I could not afford a sorority.

AB: Do you belong to anything like that now? Any kind of social organizations or anything?

VT: Yes, I, we have a club, some ladies and I, have a club that's called the Loyal Ladies. And uh, one of the other things I remember about my mother, I think you asked me if my mother ever spanked me. And my mother was an Eastern Star. And you know that's a secret organization. And she always told us not to touch her book. Well, I was cleaning one day and I moved that book, not even knowing what it was. And she got me, because she told me to never touch that book. So, now I am an Eastern Star, and at the present, I'm Worthy Matron of our chapter.

AB: Oh, very good, congratulations. I bet every time you go to a meeting, you think about her.

(VT: I do, I really do) You said when you were thinking about moving from Louisiana, that one of the things that attracted you to this area, was its closeness to Washington, because you were

interested in the kinds of things that Washington had to offer. (VT: Mmm-hmm) Do you participate in those things, or do you find that your social/cultural needs are met here in the community?

VT: I have gone to cultural things in Washington, to the museums and things like that. I don't frequent them now. There are plays that are in Washington that we're close enough that there's a bus going that we can go and enjoy those kinds of things. (AB: Mmm-hmm) There are a lot of things here now, that were not here when I first came. So, we're... the African Heritage Festival that's coming up next month that was started about four or five years ago. And we can get black art there, where we couldn't before.

RW-N: So, when you uh, go to cultural kinds of things, are, are . . . is the theater, drama, one of your favorite?

VT: Yes, , the, the on-stage plays. The live plays I like, uh-huh.

RW-N: And the organization that you mentioned before, the Loyal Ladies, what is the function of that? Is that a social club?

VT: That is a social club. We get together and we socialize. There are. . . there have been, I think, as many as twelve ladies. Now, we're down to about six (RW-N: Mmm-hmm) because all of us are getting older, and some of us are ill. Uh, one of the things that I specifically remember doing was that each year at Christmas time, we would pick a child from school who financially needed help at Christmas time. And two of those students came from my classroom one year. And I took them shopping. And we supplied them money. We took them shopping, I took them out to dinner. And uh, they bought presents for their families. And uh, each year we would pick a child and take them shopping, or something like that. (RW-N: Mmm-hmm) That I remember, because the kids had such a wonderful time. They, oh, we had a ball that day.

AB: Do you all get together for card parties or dinner or anything like that?

VT: Uh, we used to get together and have a dinner at our meetings. But we don't any more. Which reminds me now that there's another club that we are in the process of doing, which is just a card club. And we get, we try to get together once a month, and just go and play cards from maybe one to four on a Saturday afternoon.

RW-N: And is this for women?

VT: This is for women only. (RW-N: Mmm-hmm)

AB: When you came here, you were uh single. And did you meet your husband here in Harpers Ferry?

VT: I met my husband in church. And I had applied for a job back in Louisiana because I missed my family. I don't have any family here. So, I was going back to Louisiana uh, I think I had been here, what, three or four years when my dad passed on. So, I was going to go back to Louisiana that June, and I met him that May and we got married that August. So, I didn't go back. [chuckle] (RW-N: Ohh)

AB: And how long have you been married?

VT: In August it will be 26 years. But he is what kept me here, because I was packed. My brother was so disappointed because I wasn't coming home.

RW-N: And you were uh in your late 20's at the time? (VT: Mmm-hmm, late 20's) And I noticed in the newspaper clipping that I happened on, when I was visiting a school the other day, that uh, children were mentioned, two sons?

VT: He has two sons, my husband has two sons.

RW-N: And were those sons reared already when you married?

VT: They were sixteen and seventeen, I believe. (RW-N: mmm-hmm) And now, the oldest one has a son and a daughter. The youngest one has a son who is, who was two this month. The oldest one, who is Alfred the third, we took to Shepherd today, because he's going to go to Shepherd College this year.

AB: So, they live here in, in the community?

VT: No, they live in Falls Church, at the moment. His father is in service, so they have lived all over. But at the moment, his father is in Falls Church, and his father will be going to Divinity School in New Jersey. Uh, I don't know why that school sticks in my mind. I don't want to say the wrong one—Princeton, he will be going to Princeton.

AB: So he's getting out of the service?

VT: He's retired from the service and going to Princeton to Divinity.

RW-N: So you have been in continuous contact with those boys, now grown-up men and having families, (VT: right) and you have how many grandchildren? (VT: Three) Three. Who you see at least on and off. (VT: Oh, yes, uh-huh) What kind of work did your husband do, or does he do now?

VT: He's retired now. He was an x-ray technician in the federal government.

AB: Here in Harpers Ferry, or did he go. . .travel?

VT: He started out at uh, Newton D. Baker in Martinsburg, but was not satisfied there, didn't like that at all. So, he commuted to Washington for seventeen, eighteen years. And then he commuted to Laurel, near Baltimore. (AB: mmm-hmm) And that's where he retired from.

AB: That, that's quite a long distance. How did he commute? By-, did he drive? (VT: He drove) So, that's uh, an hour and a half, two hours?

VT: An hour and a half, mmm-hmm. He made it in about an hour and fifteen minutes in the mornings because he worked from seven to three, and that was before the bulk of the traffic.

AB: So he could- (VT: morning and afternoon), and afternoon. (VT: mmm-hmmm)

RW-N: You mentioned to us that you had hoped to find a husband who would, I forget how you worded it.

VT: Treat me like I thought I should be treated. [all laugh]

RW-N: Can you tell us more about that? What, what were your expectations about how to be treated? And he has fulfilled them in some ways. (VT: He has fulfilled those. He has fulfilled those) Can you talk about those? Can you talk about those expectations?

VT: I expected a man to treat me like I thought a lady should be treated, equal partners, we made decisions together, neither dominated the other. I did housework, he did housework. He says—and he's right—the night that he proposed, I talked non-stop for an hour and a half, and I am basically a quiet person [all chuckle], saying what I expected from the marriage. (RW-N: uh-huh) And left it open, that if this is what you have in mind, then, okay. And he's lived up to that. Like I would not mow grass, because I had to mow grass at home. We had a huge front yard.

RW-N: You mean when you were a child and adolescent?

VT: Yes. (RW-N: yes) When we played ball, where we played ball, I had to keep that mowed. I would not take out trash. And I had a list of things that I did not plan to do. I have, I have done those, but I don't feel that I have to do those. (RW-N: Yes) And he has remembered those things. And when I get home from school now, dinner is on the table. He doesn't cook. I cook on weekends and I freeze. But he can take it out of the freezer and warm it up and dinner is ready when I get home. And we do the dishes together. And then I sit down with schoolwork for the rest of the

evening.

RW-N: So, I daresay, this sounds like a companionable, compatible, happy marriage.

VT: Oh, yes, mmm-hmm.

RW-N: That's nice to talk to someone whose all of those expectations have gone well.

VT: And I'm very fortunate, because the children, his children being at the age that they were, would have been difficult for a lot of people. But that worked out very well.

RW-N: Did they live with you?

VT: Yes. One of them was on the way to college. And the other one was a senior.

RW-N: So, they did live with you for a while? (VT: Yes, uh-huh) And that went smoothly, too?

VT: Yes. Mmm-hmm. (RW-N: very nice) Yeah, we are very close, very close. They will call me and talk to me about things that they don't want to worry him about. But uh, the oldest, the oldest one and I sat down yesterday for about an hour and just talked. His father and his son were out in the yard, and we talked and talked.

RW-N: What kinds of things do your husband and you do together? Uh, the house, the yard, you share those activities?

VT: No, the house we share, the yard is his.

AB: The yard is his! [all laugh]

RW-N: I broke the rule; right, the yard is his. [all laughing]

VT: The yard he does.

RW-N: Do you, what kind, do you do certain kinds of leisure things together? Or do you have hobbies and he has his hobbies, and they're somewhat different?

VT: We have them together, and we have them separately (RW-N: Mm-hmm) Uh, he belongs to lots

of organizations.

RW-N: Mmh, is he more social than you, if he belongs to lots of organizations? Or is it about equal?

VT: About equal. Uh, I don't belong to as many organizations as he does, because I don't have the time. A lot of his organizations meet during the day (RW-N: Yes) and I'm still working. But uh, he is a Mason, I'm an Eastern Star. He's in a men's club, and I am in two women's clubs. He belongs to [inaudible]. . .which is the retired federal employees. . .he uh, works in the church. He's a junior warden in the church; he's on the vestry of the church. I am co-chairman of the women's organization in the church. So, we do a lot of church things together.

RW-N: And this is the church at which you met?

VT: Where I met him, yes.

RW-N: And perhaps you told us, but I've forgotten. What church is that?

VT: St. Phillip's Episcopal Church.

RW-N: That's the. . .(AB: That's Mrs. Reeler's Church) Yes. (AB: We talked with her. . .) Talked. . .yesterday about the church. Yeah. I had something else I wanted to ask and I've forgotten, so I'll let it go. You tell us more, whatever.

VT: I shop a bit more than he does. [laughter] Sometimes he goes with me, and he, if it's a day that, you know, that I know I'm gonna go shopping, sometimes he'll go and doesn't mind waiting. Because he's had open heart surgery twice and he had uh, carotid artery surgery. So, he's not quite as mobile as a lot of people are. So. . .

AB: Mmm-hmm. Does he like sports?

VT: Yes, he does.

AB: Do you?

VT: I like play-off games. I will join him for play-off games. But uh. . .

AB: Well, you know, I tell my husband, that there is always a play-off game. [VT: chuckle] I don't like sports at all. And every time I say-, he's turning on tv and I say, "Well, what are you watching?" "A play-off." It just seems to me that they go on forever.

VT: When I say play-off, I mean the Super Bowl and the World Series. Now, I will sit and read while he watches the sports, or I will sleep while he watches the sports.

RW-N: Would you give us your husband's name? I don't think we know it.

VT: Alfred Roman Twyman, Senior.

RW-N: Perhaps we have it already. And he came from around this area?

VT: He was born and raised here.

RW-N: And he is a handful of years older than you?

VT: Yeah, mmm-hmm. And we have bought a retirement home in Louisiana, so when I retire, we plan to go there and live.

AB: Back where your, in your family area, same community?

VT: Uh, 25 miles away. (AB: mmm-hmm)

RW-N: Uh, how did you come to decide to go back there?

VT: It really was his decision for me to buy a place there. (RW-N: Mmm-hmm) Because the difference in ages and he knew that I would want to be near my family when I retired. So, we made provisions that we could both be near my family.

AB: Uh, does he have brothers and sisters here?

VT: Yes, his sister lives next door, he has a brother in Baltimore, and a brother in Rhode Island.

RW-N: Do you have uh, friends in common? You and your husband have other couples who you

go out with? Tell me a little bit about your friendships, now that you're an adult.

VT: Okay. Ruby is a very good friend of mine. Mrs. Roper, Betty Roper, is a very good friend of mine. Uh, they are probably my closest friends. Then there're sisters in the Eastern Star that we go places together. He has brothers in the Masons that he, that are friends of his. Usually when we go, it's bus trips and things like that. Uh. . . we, we're not very social, as far as groups getting together locally. We used to do that when we were younger. But now everybody's busy with their own thing. (RW-N: Yeah, it changes.) Yeah. But people don't visit now as much as they used to. People used to visit a lot. But not near as much as they used to.

RW-N: You know, when you talked to us about marrying, it seemed that you had a, you were fairly young when you had some-, a keen sense of gender inequality. Where do you think that came from?

(VT: Home) Home, Louisiana. . .?

VT: Home, Louisiana.

RW-N: Somewhat in the family?

VT: Definitely in the family. (RW-N: definitely in the family) And then looking around. . . .

RW-N: Just broader observations?

VT: Mmm-hmm. And my middle brother, I think, was a role model for me, because he and his wife had what seemed to me to be an equal partnership marriage.

RW-N: Uh-huh. So, you saw the contrast, too.

VT: I saw that, yes. And to me, that seemed what I wanted. So, that's what I was looking for. And that was one of the things I prayed for, and I got it. (AB: chuckle)

RW-N: We have talked on and off about uh, racism, desegregation; we've talked about gender. (VT: Mm-hm) Some of the written analyses of black women speak to the issue uh black women carry a

kind of double whammy, a double burden, of both racism and gender inequality. (VT: right) Do you relate to that idea? Have you thought of it? Does it sound right to you?

VT: I can relate to that because, well, I can't relate to that when I think of present day marriage. Because I don't feel that I have the inequality, as far as our household. (RW-N: Yes) But black women in general, have...are expected to do much more than I think other races of women are expected to do. And you were asking me about when I first came, if there were racism in the school, and you were asking me of an incident, and I thought of one. We have what you call registers in school, where you keep attendance and the attendance has to balance out. It has to balance out between your children and it has to balance out in the whole school. Well, I made a mistake in my register and the principal called me back and we went over it and [could not get] it straight. We did as much as we could. We could not find the error; he couldn't find it; I couldn't find it. So, there was another teacher who made a mistake, but his mistake canceled out mine. (RW-N: Mmm-hmm) And seven faculty meetings that next year, he said, "Mrs. Twyman made a mistake in my-, in her register, and another teacher"—he never called the other teacher's name—"balanced it out." Not one time did he call the other teacher's name. And I counted and documented seven times. Now, he probably did it more than that, before I recognized that it was repetitious. But in seven faculty meetings.

AB: I assume the other teacher was white. . . and male? (VT: Sure) A white male.

VT: A white male. Who came to me later on and said, "Velma, you can thank me for straightening you out, (RW-N: uh-huh, yes) because it was my mistake." (AB: Mmm-hmm) But as far as the principal was concerned, I don't know to this day, whose mistake it was.

AB: So, it, it seemed that he was drawing attention to you as the problem (VT: Mmm-hmm) yeah, to the error. . . .

VT: To my inadequacies.

AB: And not the other teacher's.

VT: Not the other teacher's.

RW-N: And you also said to us the other day, that some of the things—uh, incidences, that you could at least suspect there were racism involved—that one of the things that you do is just sort of close your eyes and go on. I'm, I'm un-, can you talk a little bit about that? I mean, if it is true, that you were sensitive to both of those issues, both to gender things and to racial things, how do people, how do black women, in general, but more specifically, how do, how do you cope with that? Does it make, did it make you angry, ever? Do, I mean, how do you handle that?

VT: It did, at first. And I'm going back to the same school. There was one teacher who was at school before me every day. And when I passed by her room, if I were with another white teacher, she spoke. If I were alone, she did not. (RW-N: mmm-hmm) So I told her, "From now on," you know, "I'm open to speak to you. I'll be happy to speak to you any day of the week. But from now on, you will say, 'Good morning, Velma,' before I speak to you again." Because it just kind of made me angry, really. Uh, and I was thinking of something else. Then, there was another teacher at school who never spoke. If I walked up to her and there were a group of them, she never said one word to me and eventually she would move away from that group. I wasn't supposed to notice that; however, after Roots was on television, you could see a change in her. She spoke to me, she talked to me. And I don't know if she thought maybe I didn't realize what was happening before. And she let me know that after Roots she was kind of ashamed of herself, and she started to speak to me even out of the school. Lots of times the white teachers would talk to you [in] school, but would not talk to you out of the school. I can remember, my husband and I were going down the

street; we met one of the white employees. And instead of meeting us head-on, she turned her back to pass us, and accidentally hit the wall. She was, you know, trying that hard not to speak to us. And this was a person who, she and I would stand inside the school and talk and talk and talk. But on the street, she just did not. However, she got over that, too.

AB: You seem to be a very quiet, sort of self-contained, non-complaining person. That may not be the accurate reading. Uh, and for you to speak out as you did in behalf of yourself when the principal did not pay you the 10-month salary, and in the case of this women, that you said, "I'll speak to you when you speak to me." do you find it difficult to do, to do that?

VT: No, when I was speaking out, when I was much younger, I would say what I thought. I tried not to hurt anybody's feelings. But if I saw it, and I thought it deserved attention, I would speak about it. It was after my dad passed, that I became self-contained, because there was no home to go to. Before, I knew whatever I did, I could always go home. All of this happened between my dad's death and my marriage, that I was out there by myself. And my dad has always told me that "your tongue is gonna get you in trouble, you need to contain your tongue." Because when I did start speaking out, I started speaking out, I didn't have any qualms, I was not afraid of anything. And then when he passed on, it dawned on me, hey I'm out here by myself, I cannot go home to his comfort. So, I did become a very self-contained person.

AB: Was it financial comfort, or emotional comfort, that your dad offered you at that time?

VT: Emotional, because financially I could have made it, you know. I was working, and he taught us to take care of our money. So, it wasn't financial. It was just, "Hey, I'm out here by myself." And being this far from any of my relatives, I...just looked at the ... "Whoa, maybe I should not be as outspoken as I have been." And I just gradually became, you know, as you say, more self-

contained, less complaining. Uh, but then, being a black woman, you know who and where to say things, where they get where you want them to get. So, I have gone that avenue, more than saying it. Because lots of times, if you say what you think, you anger people. But if you wait until the situation is over, and then come back, you can get the results that you need, without confrontation. And I have never liked confrontations. Not even when I was younger, I did not like confrontation. I would say what I had to say. But I was not, I didn't confront people. Because I didn't like, I don't like arguing, and I don't like fussing and that.

RW-N: Am I right to assume, though, that even though you don't like fussing and arguing, that you have lines that people, that are—pay attention to?

VT: I have a limit.

RW-N:: You have a limit.

VT: I have a limit. And you can cross that line a couple of times.

RW-N: You're quite tolerant about that?

VT: Very tolerate. I'm very tolerate about most things. But then, after a while, when I find out that, you know, you are pushing me, I don't like to be pushed. I'm tolerant, but I don't like to be pushed.

RW-N: How about the Civil Rights Movement? Do you ever participate in anything overtly in that?

Uh, did you ever belong to any of the civil rights organizations?

VT: I'm, I'm a life member of the NAACP at the moment. Uh, every year that they have the Martin Luther King march, I march with them every year. I uh,

RW-N: Would you say that again? I didn't understand it.

VT: Each year, for, in February we have a Martin Luther King march.

RW-N: And you go every year to that?

VT: Every year. And we march down the street in Charles Town. And I march with that every year. (RW-N: Uh-huh) At the time, when the, the demonstrations were going on and the protests were going on, I wasn't in a position to join.

RW-N: You mean because of your occupation?

VT: In college, and because (RW-N: in college) of my occupation, the location of those things, where I was located, there weren't big demonstrations. But here and now, yes, I do.

RW-N: Am I to take it, though, that when those demonstrations were going on, that you felt positively about them, (VT: Oh, yes, yes) even though you couldn't?

VT: Very much so.

RW-N: Has your husband participated in those local marches with you?

VT: He has not been able to do the walking. But he has met us, he has dropped me off to do that.

RW-N: He supports you in that? (VT: Oh, yes) You feel the same way about (VT: Right) that issue? (VT: Mmm-hmm, very much so) Have you ever participated in anything that, that we might call the Women's Movement, or Womanism?

VT: Not particularly. Because, I, I don't know that there has been anything local that I was available for.

RW-N: It's often said that the Women's Movement, mainstream Women's Movement, hasn't been very good about uh, opening the doors and seeing black women as full partners in that. (VT: mm-hmm) Do you have any feelings about that or is it kind of out there and removed from you?

VT: It is out there and removed and maybe that's why, maybe it is removed for that reason. [pause] Something I was thinking about while I was talking a minute ago, and I can't remember it. Oh, I am a member of the cultural...uh, education section at the school; I've worked on, on that committee for

several years, Cultural Diversity Committee.

RW-N: Oh, the Cultural Diversity Committee, uh-huh.

VT: Mmm-hmm. Where we have been trying to get minority teachers, not necessarily black, but minority teachers into the school system. And uh,

RW-N: Have you had any success in that?

VT: Yes, we have, we hired one black teacher at our school last year. (RW-N: mm-hmm) And I think there's going to be one black teacher at Ranson School next year, that I'm aware of. And when we went over to Shepherd College today, I met a young lady who is a sophomore in uh secondary education. And I was telling her that we were interested in education majors, and if, you know, as she got closer to graduation, we would be probably looking her up. But the, the system in West Virginia is so that you have to come up through the ranks. And it's not easy for anyone to just apply for a job and get it. Because the law says that you have to come up through the ranks, you have to be on the substitute list for a while. And then they're placed from the substitute list. So, that's a hindrance to black people, or minority people actually.

AB: And for anybody who's coming out of state, who doesn't have the opportunities to go through that system, you can't come from some place else and wait on substitutes to pay your bills.

VT: No, you can't. And that's, that's (RW-N: yeah) something that has stopped us. And we've been looking for a route around that and we just have not found it yet.

RW-N: We have several questions we want to ask that are really general. And some of them we've already asked, so they won't be so surprising to you. But when you look back on your life—we're gonna ask you a lot of "when you look back on your life" questions—uh, who do you think, who were the people who most influenced you, most shaped you? And that can be for good or bad.

Sometimes we have contact with people who turn us in a direction that's not so positive. And then who were the positive role models for you?

VT: I think my parents did more to shape me than anybody. They were probably role models. My mother was. My mother was very compassionate, a very compassionate person.

RW-N: So from your mother, so your mother put forth a role model of compassion for people (VT: mm-hmm) that you see in yourself?

VT: That I wish I had. I see some of it. (RW-N: mm-hmm) And I am told that I have some of it that I don't see. But I'm working on that. And I have a sister who is just like my mother. She, she just thinks of the smallest things that means so much to people. And I'm trying to get there. (RW-N: Mm-hmm) Uh, my father taught us how to live. All of the fourteen of us, we are all hard workers. There's no one in my family who does not work, or is not willing to work. Now, there's some sisters who are housewives who did not have to work, or did not work. But he taught us how to live, how to work, how to live and how to take care of ourselves.

AB: When you say how to live, what do you mean?

VT: Uh. . . one of the things that he said is that take what you have and make what you want out of it. And he, that was his motto. And everything that we did, you know, if we said, "We need this," okay. "What are you gonna do with it?" "We want to do this?" "Well, why can't you take this and do this with it?" So, he broadened our thinking as to getting where we needed to go, or getting what we needed with the resources that we had.

RW-N: Are there any particular teachers that were role models?

VT: The 11th grade teacher that I was talking about. (RW-N: that you talked about) She was a role model for me.

AB: Any in college?

VT: College is not as clear to me as high school is. Maybe I was so busy studying and trying to make sure that I passed, that I don't recall the college teachers as much as I do the, the high school teachers. Like one I do remember, she was not a teacher, she was a dorm mother, I guess you would call her. And I think I spoke to you about my parents having to send a letter, if I was gonna leave the campus? (AB: Mm-hmm) Well, one Sunday they took my mother to the hospital. And the hospital was about fifty miles from school. Instead of them calling me and telling me, my cousin came and told me that my mother was in the hospital. So I went to the lady and I said—we used to call her Sarge—"My mother's in the hospital. I really want to go and see her, and I don't have a letter." So, she said, "You absolutely, positively cannot go." And I said, "I really would like to go and see my mother, and I promise you I will be back in here before dark." So, she said, "You have to ask the dean of women." So I called; the dean of women was not in. I went back again, and I said, "I'm sorry, I am going to see my mother. Now, when I get back, if you tell me to pack up and go home, I'll do that. But I am going to see my mother." Now, I remember her because, I know that she was doing her job. But I think she could have kind of said, "I understand what you're saying, but my job says I can't let you go." And I would have said, "Okay, you're doing your job, and I'm doing what I have to do." But anyway, I went and I came back, and when I came back, I told her, "I'm back." And I asked if she called the dean of women, and she said, "No." And I said, "Well, if you choose to call her and you choose to send me home, I will go. But I just could not stay here without going to see my mother."

So, after that, she kind of softened a little bit, I think. But I do remember her. I mean, she was strictly by the rule, everything. I can remember us trying to hide in the dorm, and not going to church

on Sundays. She went to every door, knocked on the door, and made all of us get out of bed and go to church.

RW-N: And did you respect that, or when you look back on it, do you respect that or do you, does that stand as an example of where people should be a little bit more flexible?

VT: I look back on that as being a little bit. . .un, unflexible. [chuckle]. I do believe that rules are to be followed, (RW-N: yes) but I think there are extenuating circumstances. Uh, if I had been a person who had ever been in trouble or she had ever had to speak to me about anything, I could understand why she would possibly say no. And to tell me absolutely, positively not, that was a little bit further than I thought she should have gone with it.

RW-N: Now, you read a lot when you were a child, right? (VT: Mm-hmm) Did you ever, did you ever get role models from your reading?

VT: I think I read just for entertainment. I...to this day, I do not remember authors. I do not remember names of books. I just remember story lines. I just read for the enjoyment of it. So, no, I can't say that I did.

RW-N: Do you still read much?

VT: Not as much as I would like to.

RW-N: Because life is just too busy? (VT: Uh-huh) When you do read, what kinds of things do you read?

VT: I'm reading Maya Angelou's The Heart of a Woman; I just started that. I am reading Crossing, and I do not remember the author of that book. That is a white man who is married to a black woman, and he's going into the black communities to see how black people lived. And he has gone to a lot of the southern states. And uh, he, when he has gone in, white people have talked to him, like

they would talk to any other white person, not really knowing where he was coming from. And it has been an eye-opener to him. And I'm not finished with that one. I'm about maybe halfway through that one. But that, that's the kind of thing that-, I like love stories, and I like that kind of thing.

RW-N: So those kinds of books, some of them, I gather, the love stories are sort of, kind of just for entertainment? (VT: Mm-hmm) Uh, but those other two books you named have qualities of kind of continuing learning by the experience of other people (VT: right) that...

VT: And I just finished one in there. I cannot think of the name of it. But it was a love story about a slave. It wasn't-, slavery was not in it, but it was about a, an ex-slave, who helped another slave escape.

RW-N: Now, is that fiction, that book?

VT: Uh, yes, I think it is.

RW-N: Yes, so you read some fiction, some non-fiction?

VT: Right. But I read something every night before I go to bed. Usually it's two pages, and then I fall asleep. [laughing] (RW-N: Yes, I know, I know) But I read something every night before I go to bed.

RW-N: How do, how would you describe yourself to uh other people? Suppose one of us had called you up on the telephone and said, "Tell us what you're like."

VT: Ohh. . . how do I describe myself? I would say one of fourteen children, who is quiet, I don't mind working, I love teaching, uh. . . to see children get a concept is probably the greatest high that I could ever have.

RW-N: So, teaching is really important to your satisfaction? (VT: Right) To your sense of

accomplishment? [recorder beeping]

VT: Mm-hmm. Uh. . . I have a very loving husband, who has two children that I respect, who respect me, and three grandchildren that I feel the same way about.

AB: Uh. . .have you thought how it will be when you retire, and how you will fill the time that is now filled by teaching?

VT: Yes. I am a person who-, I'm never idle. There's never a time that I'm doing nothing. There's so much that I see to do, that I want to do, that I never get around to. However, I plan to take some more sewing classes, or some sewing classes, and to sew for people as a supplemental income.

RW-N: Is retirement around the corner for you? Or you're not sure yet?

VT: Uh. . .at this point, I can see two to three years.

RW-N: Uh-huh. But you're already preparing for it (VT: mmmh) mentally and in (VT: mentally) terms of what you will do and buying the house, right?

VT: And my, my family is just waiting for me to come home.

RW-N: For you to come home.

AB: Are you the only one who strayed this far from home?

VT: Alone, yes, uh-huh. I have a sister in Atlanta. [interruption and greeting by Mr. Twyman] . . .a sister in Atlanta. However, her daughter and two grandchildren are there with her. But I am the only one who has gone this far alone.

RW-N: What do you especially like about yourself?

VT: That I am. . .I think I like that I, I can listen. I'm not one who has to talk all of the time. And I'm talking here because you guys are asking me.

RW-N: That's right. [laughter]

VT: But uh, I can sit and listen to people. And one of the things that my dad has always said is that you learn more with your mouth closed than you do with it open. (RW-N: Mm-hmm) So, I, I can sit and listen. And I think I am a good listener. And there are people who, if they are really stressed out, they will call me and I will sit and listen. And I might offer questions, but I'm not one to give advice that I expect to be taken. (RW-N: Mm-hmm) So, I think that I would, I'm pretty proud of that, that I can listen to other people's problems and give an encouraging word here and there, and have them work out their own problems. I almost went into counseling when I was in school. The reason that I didn't do that, was because there were not enough courses at the college. But I took all of the counseling and psychology courses that they had to offer.

RW-N: And what is there about yourself that you would still like to improve?

VT: I would like to be a bit more outgoing. I really would. Uh. . . (RW-N: Why?) Because it's, it seems to be more fun to me. [all laugh] (RW-N: ooh)

AB: Would you define yourself or describe yourself as being shy?

VT: Very much so. Very much so.

RW-N: So you're saying you'd like to get rid of some of that shyness? (VT: Mm-hmm. I would, I would) Because it might make you feel more comfortable with people, and more kind of naturally outgoing and enjoying people, (VT: Right) in a kind of more natural way. (VT: Yeah) Have you ever thought about working on that consistently?

VT: Yes, I, I. . . .

END OF TAPE 3 - SIDE 1

BEGIN TAPE 3 - SIDE 2

RW-N: So we were asking if you have thought about working on that shyness if you'd like to change

it.

VT: I have thought about it. I was. . .just last weekend, on Saturday night, we gave a recognition banquet to our Grand Worthy Matron, and I had to speak twice. And I was extremely uncomfortable with that. And I would like to be able to do that. But how do you go about working on that kind of thing? I, I wish there were courses that I could take to do that (RW-N: Mm-hmm). But that is the one thing that I know that I would like to do. And I have a sense of humor, but what comes from the heart and what comes from the lips are different. I am perceived differently than I'm intended. And I think that adds to my shyness. Because I will say something that I think is funny, and people have to think awhile before they think it's funny. [all laugh]

RW-N: So, so there's a part of you that you'd like to kind of bring out and share more with people?

VT: Right, uh-huh. Now, my baby sister is uh, seems very uh, comfortable with that kind of thing. I mean, she can. . .see people on the street and strike up a conversation.

AB: But tell me, yet you are a successful teacher, you were named teacher of the year. And in a sense, you do that with parents and with your students, I would think.

VT: Yes, I do. I have come a long ways. I can remember, when I was in high school, I was tall and thin. I was so self-conscious, that I would not leave a room by myself. I was just that self-conscious. And I still retain some of that. I am much, much better than I used to be. And, you know, that kind of thing. And I do find myself talking to people on the street and saying things that I think, "Wow, did I say that?" So, that is helping. (RW-N: Uh-huh) But getting up in front of a group of people is not my kind of thing. And I think it may be, teaching might have been one of the reasons why I can't, because when you teach, you have to talk to children. And you lose the vocabulary that you once had. And one of my teachers in college-, I did a term paper-, I cannot remember exactly which

one but the thought has never left me, said, "Excellent ideas, very elementarily expressed." (AB: chuckle) And it was true, because I was-, and I was in graduate school. I was used to talking to kids so that the vocabulary that I used with adults, I had lost.

RW-N: So one of the ways in which you have changed is that uh, you have gotten somewhat more comfortable. (VT: Yes, somewhat) Less shy, (VT: somewhat) is the way you perceive yourself. Are there other ways in which you see yourself as changing as-, I'm talking about really the long haul, from the time you were, say, a young woman?

VT: Uh, how did I change? I, I talk more than I used to.

RW-N: So you're not quite as quiet?

VT: Not quite as quiet.

RW-N: Have your interests shifted much?

VT: Not really. Well, I could not sew at all, and do love to sew now. But that was a necessity, because I was tall, thin, could find nothing to fit. And I wore mini dresses before mini dresses came in style, (RW-N: Mm-hmm) because none of the dresses that I could buy were long enough. So I did learn how to sew and I am very pleased with it. I love sewing. That's my stress release; that's how I release stress.

AB: You make your own clothing now?

VT: Most of it, mm-hmm, yes. There was a time that I didn't buy anything that I could make. So, yes, I do make most of my own clothing.

RW-N: Do you think that you have grown in self-confidence, as, you have (VT: I have) reached this time of life?

VT: I have grown in self-confidence.

AB: Do you have any regrets at this point in your life?

VT: Yes and no. I regret that I wasn't geographically closer to my family. Because I, to me, I think it's as I'm getting older, family has become very important to me. I mean, my original family. We get together as often as we can. Now, getting what? thirteen together is almost an impossibility, because somebody's job right now, cannot leave. But there were eight of us who got together extremely often. Eight or eleven? Eleven of us. Three of them are now gone, so there are eight of us that... And I really miss being with them, cause I-, we just have so much fun when we're together. Uh, when Maxine, who's my baby sister, Mamie, and I are together, they call us the Three Musketeers.

RW-N: Now you're the three younger, (VT: Three youngest) that younger group, you're talking about?

VT: Yeah. And then there's Marie, Josephine and Izola, who are there most of the time that we're together. And when we're at home together, usually at Mamie's house, my husband will come in and say, "Uh-oh, there are the Wagners together, I gotta find some place to go." [chuckles] But I, I do miss that, and I, I am looking forward to getting closer to them.

RW-N: Do you think that you have achieved some of your dreams of your youth?

VT: Oh, yes. The two dreams that I had were, and I think I might have mentioned them before, to have a job that I was reasonably good at, and to have a husband that I really liked and liked the way that he treated me. And those two things I have.

RW-N: So you have, you have achieved those uh, and it did require, as it turned out, uh, leaving Louisiana and your families? (VT: Right) So that figures in. However, it looks like you're gonna arrange to get back there, right?

VT: Working on it. We're working on it, yes.

RW-N: And it sounds like your husband is completely comfortable with that, and. . .

VT: The closer it gets, the less comfortable he is. But I understand that. Because he has been here with his family for all these years, and it's going to be very hard on him, to just pick up and leave and go. And I'm going to be, you know, very patient with that. Even if it means staying an extra year or two, until I'm sure that he's ready.

RW-N: Is there anything that we haven't asked you about, that we should have asked you about? Things that stand out in any way. . .small ones or big ones?

VT: No, I didn't talk a lot about my siblings. And I. . .I have, had a sister-in-law that, now she married the oldest brother. And she jelled so well into our family that for the longest time I thought she was my sister. And when my mother died, she kind of took over the family. And then when she died, my baby brother kind of took over the family. And he just died in November. Uh, two other sisters were planning to move to Louisiana, but then, now that he's gone, they are kind of dragging their feet about moving. (RW-N: Mm-hmm) Because we were all going to be there and we were gonna really enjoy each other like—excuse me—I haven't had the time to do. I've gone there every summer.

AB: Where are those two sisters?

VT: One-, they're both in the state of Illinois. One is in East St. Louis and one is in Chicago.

AB: Who kind of heads the family now?

VT: Uh, I'm afraid when I get there. . .

AB: It's gonna to be you! [laughter]

VT: Yeah, when Momma first died, and at that time, I was very outspoken. If one sister needed her

coattail pulled, they would say, “Velma, go and tell her.” And I could go and do it, you know, and would not offend her. And then after I got here, they would say, “We need you to do this and we need you to do that.” I - “Wait a minute now, you are there. You can do that now.” And I think that when I get there, I’m gonna fall right back into that role.

AB: Into that role, mm-hmm.

RW-N: Now when you have talked about yourself on and off, um, telling us about, that you were somewhat quiet, somewhat shy, and you’re even aware of that now, and, and yet you also talked to us about speaking out, at least on, what I would certainly consider important kinds of issues—to stick up for yourself in some way. (VT: uh-huh) That it was tougher after your father died, because you felt-, you were away from everybody and felt more vulnerable. (VT: Mm-hmm) I guess what I’m trying to say is that despite all the shyness, I feel this kind of. . . kind of core. . .some kind of . . . self. . . .

VT: I feel that I’m a strong woman, if that’s what you’re trying to say.

RW-N: That’s what I’m fishing for. (VT: Yes) I mean, I feel that in you, when you talk. Because when it comes down to it, you will speak up for yourself in important ways.

VT: I think I’m a very strong woman.

RW-N: In that way? Or would you define strong in some other way, as well?

VT: Probably. . .well, in, in the way that I will take a lot. I am patient, but I will only be pushed so far. (RW-N: Mmm-hmm) I think I’m very strong spiritually, I think I’m very strong emotionally. Uh. . .and the summer after my husband retired, the carotid artery blocked. And this was in August, and in September the doctor told me that in November I would be a widow. And that was a shock, and I think that kind of made me strong. I’m not a widow yet. But uh, that kind of thing. And he

never knew that. I just told him that a few years ago. And he said, “Well, that was unbelievable that you could go through this without that showing as much as it did.” Uh. . .

RW-N: So you think you have a lot of emotional resources (VT: Oh, yes) that you can call on. (VT: Yes) if you need them. (VT: Mm-hmm)

AB: Ah, you spoke of the passing of your mother when there was a great emotional blow for you. Uh, have there been times in your life, other times like that, that have been just a, a moment that you remember, or that you were different after or so?

VT: Uh. . .yeah, when she passed. . .I-, she passed because—I think most people know that you don’t appreciate a mother until you are in that position. And I, I don’t think I was old enough to appreciate her at that time. Now, I had just worked one year and was-, I had plans for her that I did not carry through. Uh, my baby brother did take her to California. He was going to Sanford—ah Stanford—two summers, and he took her to California to visit with her other children while he was in school. And he did that twice. He took her to Texas, and he would take her places. My father was not a traveler; he was not going to go any place. But there were things that we wanted my mother to do, and...I kind of feel cheated out of having done the things for her, that I wanted to do for her.

RW-N: Do you remember feeling angry about that?

VT: Yes, I do. And I questioned God about it. And I. . . for a long time, I did. And I wondered why my mother went before my father. Because. . .

AB: But it sounded as if you needed both of them.

VT: I did, I needed both of them. But she was just. . . and I think maybe it was because she suffered for a year and a half. And even of the life that she had, eighteen months of it were-, she suffered. And my father did not. He-, I talked to him on Sunday afternoon, and on Monday night they called

me and told me that he was gone. And I thought, "That is a good way to go." (AB: Mmm-hmm)

Then why couldn't have my mother gone like that? Why did she have to linger and suffer?

RW-N: So you have some sense of your mother going too early, whereas she could have kind of gotten more from you, (VT: from life, period) from life (VT: yes) that you might have helped provide (VT: oh yes). And then worse off, she had to suffer before the end, as well? (VT: Right, uh-huh)
Yes.

AB: So, are there other moments that have sort of punctuated your life, I mean, just like an exclamation point, times that, of transition or so, for you?

VT: When I lost my first sibling; my oldest brother died first. And that was hard on us. That was extremely hard. He is the one that when I got married, and took my husband home, he was the one who took my husband off to the side and said, "Okay, if you love her, fine. If you treat her right, fine. If you find out that you do not love her or you do not want to treat her right, you send her back to us, because if you misuse her and she calls me, I'm coming." And that was the emotional support I had after my dad, and then that was gone. Uh, the last brother, my baby brother that just died, he was the kind of person that made everyone of us feel, like my mother did, that we were the only one that he was doing anything for. And come to find out after he died, he was doing so much for everybody. After we sat down and talked, uh—my sister in St. Louis loved cashews. Any time he found anybody going in that direction, he sent her a can of cashews. I mean, just little things like that. Uh, the house that we are buying is around the corner from him. And he watched that house. Everything that needed to be done, he would call me and say, "I think this should be done, I think that should be done." And he got it done. When that left, I . . . I just feel . . . again, out here on my own. And so, the major deaths in my family have really made a difference to me.

Uh, when I became “Teacher of the Year” was a turning point in my life, because I had no idea that I was even considered. Now I think you have to apply and that, at that time, you were recommended by your principal. And then the principals and the superintendent made the selection. When I was told that, I was speechless. I . . . that improved my shyness, to a point. That gave me a lot of self-confidence.

RW-N: So that was a turning point, because it was such a deliberate act of positive feedback for you (VT: Right, mmm-hmm), that you began to see yourself differently?

VT: Well, if, if that many people saw all of that in me, there must have been something that I was missing. [laughter]

RW-N: Now that, now this was in 19. . .90? (VT: 1990, mm-hmm) Nineteen ninety, when it happened. When you look at your life, uh, let me back up a little bit. Uh. . . we’ve talked a lot about how people develop, right? And I, of course, have studied developmental psychology, we both have; I’m sure all three of us have, both of you and me. How, how do you see your life as you look back at it, in terms of—let me give you some examples of that, to kind of get at what, to get at what I mean. Some people describe their lives as sort of a smooth path, doesn’t have any bumps in it and it goes uphill, and some smoothly but it goes downhill, gets worse. Uh, others describe it as really a very bumpy road, or somewhat bumpy road, things that they have to get through, but it still may go up or down. Other people talk of their lives as kind of in sections or sometimes like in chapters of a book, and you’re in every one of those chapters, but they’re in different places with different people, and they’re not very much connected. If you think of some of those models, how might you describe yours? And you might have a different structure, too.

VT: As you were talking, I think of mine having been fairly smooth, and God not wanting me to get

too comfortable with it. And every once in a while, he would say, "I'm here." And I think I prayed from a little girl for him to not let me ever forget that he was there. And I think sometimes he slapped me to say, "I'm here." And then later on, it dawned on me, "Okay, he's just telling me that he's here." And I think that's the way I see it.

RW-N: So he would create times of need, times that were harder for you, when you had need that-, as a reminder.

VT: Well, I'm not saying that he created them, but they were there (RW-N: Mm-hmm), and at that time, I realized that he was still there. (RW-N: Uh-huh, uh-huh) So I'm not saying that he created them. (RW-N: uh-huh, right) I kind of believe in predestination. One of my sisters says that she doesn't. (RW-N: Yeah) But I kind of believe that. And I think that most of the things that happen are for a reason and there's gonna be a positive outcome, (RW-N: Mm-hmm) for all of them. Sometimes you don't see it right away. But I think there's going to be a positive outcome.

RW-N: So that's somewhat of an optimistic look, even when bad things happen. (VT: Right) An optimistic view. Do you think your life has gotten better as you've gone through it? (VT: Oh, yes) So, it's gone up hill? (VT: Oh, yes) [inaudible]. . things along the way? Uh-huh.

VT: [inaudible] was asking me that. . . oh, I have a niece that says that uh, as we get older, we get better. (RW-N: mmm-hmm) And I think I pierced my ears at thirty, I cut my hair at forty, I bought a house at fifty. And I said, "You better watch out at sixty!" [laughter] So, yes, it has gotten progressively better.

RW-N: Uh-huh. Let's see, I thought I had something else. Let me check. I keep these little pieces of paper to go back to—I keep forgetting things. Do you have anything that you would like to add, still, that we have not asked you, or any questions that you have?

VT: Not that I can remember. I think I jotted down most of the things that I forgot from before. But I . . . I think I am a very happy person. I think that uh . . . quiet but happy. And I'm looking forward to retirement, because I think that's gonna open up a whole new world for me. And I hope somewhere out there, I'm gonna lose more of this shyness. And uh

RW-N: So you're hoping for more growth? (VT: Oh, yes) I mean, there's new things to come.

VT: New things to come.

RW-N: And some of that's going to be some growth.

VT: And when I get home, I hope to use some of my time to help some child in the community, and our older relatives, who need people to take them to the doctor and that kind of thing. One of my sisters, Mamie, is doing that for (RW-N: uh-huh) them, and it's . . . when I get there, I plan to help her do that, so that we can do more for them.

RW-N: And that's exactly what I did want to ask you about. (VT: chuckle) That sense of, of reaching out to other people. I, I certainly get the sense, when you talk about teaching, that that has to be a part of your teaching, is a part of your teaching. (VT: Right) And you talked about kids understanding concepts, or something. What else do you give these kids, besides their understanding concepts? I mean, understanding concepts seem to me like intellectual growth. (VT: Right) That I highly value so I'm not putting that down, but there are other dimensions of that?

VT: I try to give them, to build on their self-confidence, because mine is down. And I try to let them know that they are good at something, no—they're good at a lot of things, but they are better at something than anybody else. (RW-N: uh-huh) Now, what, I haven't found mine, but...

AB: Sounds to me that you have. [laughter]

VT: But I try to let them know that they are good people who can do good things. And there is

something that they can do better than anybody else. Being in special education, they have already been put off to the side. (RW-N: Yes) And I have worked to bring equality to special students. That's one of the things that—and I think I have improved the life of special children in this community.

RW-N: And when you go home, you want, you're, you're still going to give back to others in somewhat different ways...different ways.

VT: I picture myself visiting a school and finding some child who is over in a corner, who feels worthless, and helping that child realize their potential, as far as their self-worth.

AB: Do you feel any special need for that child to be a black child? Would it be any child? White child? Polka dot child?

VT: I feel a need for that child to be a black child. (AB: Why?) Because it's more than likely that that child is gonna be black.

RW-N: So you see that there's-, among black children, there might be greater needs to have this extra kind of help, extra self-confidence building? (VT: Right) Uh-huh.

AB: How do you feel about race at this point in your life?

VT: I feel that it is an issue that will always be with us. And I don't see it not being an issue. I hope, and I'm optimistic, that as children come up away from a lot of the stereotypes and away from a lot of the prejudices of their grandparents, that it's going to get better. But I don't think the media is gonna ever let it die. I think it will always be pointed out in the media.

AB: Do you have any anger?

VT: I, I do, but then I look at it as reality. I feel anger when it puts another person down, when it, when it handicaps another person. That's when I feel angry. When it puts another person in a

position to look at themselves as less than anybody else, and not seeing their own self worth. But I don't think it's gonna ever go away, ever. And I don't think, mainly the media. I think if the media were less biased, then society would probably be less biased.

RW-N: How do the media do that? How do they present—they present things in a biased way? Is that what you're saying?

VT: Oh, yes. I have watched football games, and the cheerleaders. If there's a black cheerleader on the end, the camera will completely wipe that one out. Uh, it's, it's just the whole thing is biased. And I have pointed that out to a couple of white people who had never even noticed that. And I said, "Watch television, I mean, just watch it and just look." Uh, how many positive black things do you see on television? There are stories that come out, if they, the people are white, you usually don't see the picture. If they are black, the picture is there. They'll go. . . .

AB: [overlapping voice; inaudible] . . . negative.

VT: Right, to get a picture of that black person. And they won't say that they are black, but they will, they will dig to get a picture of that black person to put up there. But usually, and when I was pointing this out to that person, I said, "They did not have a picture up there." Ninety percent of the time that person is white. So those are the kinds of things that the media [do] that people maybe now are realizing that they didn't before.

RW-N: And you have some black-, some white people in your life who you can say these things to?

(VT: Yes) Do you have white friends?

VT: Uh, I do not socialize outside of the school with white friends. One of the teacher's aides that was in my room was white, and I could say that to her. (RW-N: Uh-huh) Which brings up another incident. I teach black history. And the way that I do that, is each child in my class is assigned a

black person, and they have to remember only one thing about that person. It doesn't matter what it is, as long as you can remember one thing about that person. So this particular child was assigned Mary McLeod Bethune. And when it was her turn to get up and tell what she had done, okay, "What do you remember about his lady?" and she said, "She started a school for niggers." I mean, just, just like I would say good morning to you. And I, I went right on. I didn't say anything at all at that time. I think I rephrased it. I said, "Yes, she started a school for black people." And went on. And my blood pressure went up, and my aide saw that my blood pressure went up. So she said, after the kids were all gone, she said, "Velma, you know she's saying exactly what she hears at home." I said, "You're absolutely right. But when I get finished with this lesson tomorrow, I want her to go home and say exactly what she heard at school." [chuckling] So, when she came back the next day, I talked to her and I said, "Sandy, you said that she started a school for niggers." And I said, "Yes;" I said, "do you know what a nigger is?" She said, "No." I said, "Well, let's get a dictionary." And we looked it up. We found that it was, well, the way that she understood, it was somebody who was dirty and nasty and not nice. So I said uh, "And you were telling me about such and such a person yesterday, and they were acting like a nigger." I said, "What color were they?" Her eyes got that big. So I went on, and I told her some other things, and I said, "Well, a nigger is not necessarily a black person. Black people can be niggers and white people can be niggers." So, I think she probably went home and told her mother that, too. But uh, that's how we got around that.

AB: It was, it was good that you waited until the next day, when. . . (VT: Oh, yes)

RW-N: When your blood pressure was somewhat back to normal, yeah.

AB: A nice way to handle it.

VT: And that's another thing that I think I can do. I can ride through a situation, and when the time

is right, straighten it out.

RW-N: Uh-huh, uh-huh. Anything? Thank you very much.

END OF INTERVIEWS

Copies of newspaper articles which were
provided by Mrs. Velma Twyman, July, 1997.

Velma Twyman Named Teacher Of Year

Sept. 13, 1990

As Page Jackson teachers peered through the door giving her the thumbs-up sign, Velma Twyman was clearly embarrassed.

"Look at what they are doing," she said quietly. "They're such kidders."

Mrs. Twyman's quiet way with children and her outstanding teaching techniques over the past 23 years helped her to be selected Jefferson County's Teacher of the Year on Sept. 12. She spent last Friday being congratulated by her colleagues at the school and throughout the school system.

Voted on by her principal, the other 11 county principals and county administrators, Mrs. Twyman was chosen to represent the county in the state's Teacher of the Year contest.

"I called Dr. (Robert) Ingram (the county superintendent) this morning to tell him that I could speak," Mrs. Twyman said one day after learning of the honor. "When he came here to tell me about it (being named), it was a total emotional and physical shock. I was speechless."

Mrs. Twyman has been a special education teacher at the school since it was built in the late 1970s. Before that she worked at the old Page Jackson School, which now houses the County's administrative offices.

Mrs. Twyman, who currently teaches 10 students in grades kindergarten-three, moved to the area in 1967 after graduating from

Grambling College in Louisiana. She chose Jefferson County because of its proximity to Washington, D.C.

As an educator, Mrs. Twyman believes all students have the right and the ability to learn if they are taught on their level and their pace and through their best learning style.

"I love to work with children who need more help because I move slowly and I have a lot of patience," she said. "When they understand a concept and you see the light in their eyes, it is beautiful."

She added that all children will learn if they know a teacher expects them to do so.

Mrs. Twyman advocates an "open classroom" in which parents, as well as students, feel comfortable.

"I encourage parents to get involved with their children's educations," she said. "There is much more parental input now than in the past. I'd say I know 95 percent of the parents even before 'Meet-the-Teacher night.'"

Mrs. Twyman, who said she was once solicited by the state of Maryland to become a teacher there, has opted to stay in West Virginia for the past 20 years.

"I have been doing something I love here - something I will continue to do," she said. "Money can't change that."

Mrs. Twyman attributes much of her success to a supportive husband, Alfred "Buck", and sons, Alfred Jr.



Students in Velma Twyman's class learn a math lesson. At right is student Christopher Thomas and at left is Kevin Farr.

and Donnie. Buck is retired, Alfred Jr. is a lieutenant commander in the Navy, stationed in New York City and Donnie is an operations manager for Federal Express in Gaithersburg.

When asked what she would do to celebrate her selection, Mrs. Twyman said she would work on "doing a bet-

ter job at teaching."

Ingram praised Mrs. Twyman for her many years of dedicated service to the students of Jefferson County.

"Mrs. Twyman is a truly outstanding educator of whom we are very proud," Ingram said. "Her work over the years has been exemplary, and

we can't be more pleased that Jefferson County's Teacher of the Year."

Mrs. Twyman's application as state teacher of the year will be forwarded to Charleston where a panel of educational experts will select the state winner.



Velma Twyman, Jefferson County's Teacher of the Year, was presented with a special plaque by Superintendent Robert H. Ingram at the November 13 Board of Education meeting, held during American Education Week. Mrs. Twyman was given a standing ovation by the 60 people who attended the meeting.

The attached clippings appeared on one page of Spirit of Jefferson Farmer's Advocate, Thursday, May 9, 1991, as an article entitled "Salute To Teachers."

ALUTE TO TEA

I like teachers because they help me if I have a problem. Teachers give work to children so they can learn. Teachers are nice because they give us parties if we are good. Most teachers care about their students. I like teachers because they are pretty and they let us do crafts.

Lori Slonaker
North Jefferson Elementary

Teachers are a dreadful subject. Appreciating them is even more repulsive for some students. I on the other hand enjoy my stay in particular classes. This I say with all honesty and virtue within me that there are three reasons why I appreciate teachers.

The first reason is because they are a fountain of knowledge and wisdom just waiting to be opened. Throughout my school life I have seen and expect to see more teachers that will wait and explain and re-explain the material in class. They don't just give you a page number and say to answer all the problems on the page.

The second reason that I appreciate teachers is because they are human beings also. Just because they stand in the front of the room and try to teach us students new material doesn't mean that they don't have feelings. I understand the hardships teachers go through and so I think of them highly.

The third and final reason I appreciate teachers is because if you're feeling low or something is wrong, they will always be there to listen. In the past I've had teachers that as soon as you walked in the door they knew something was wrong and would talk to you later in the day.

...I will come across more reasons later in life. Right now these are my reasons. All in all, I know that I'll always appreciate my teachers.

Chris House
Harpers Ferry Junior High

Teacher appreciation should be where every parent and student appreciates all of the teachers.

Teachers should feel respected and everyone should make them feel respected.

My first grade teacher is my favorite.

She is one of the most exciting, caring, and understanding teachers I've ever known.

When there was extra time at the end of the class, she would teach some Spanish.

I don't see her that often because she moved. So I will talk to her when I see her.

Teachers should be appreciated more often.
Anonymous
Charles Town Junior High

I have had a wide variety of teachers through my education here in Jefferson County.

On the whole I have indeed learned a great deal and have been inspired to do as much as possible so I can be a better person.

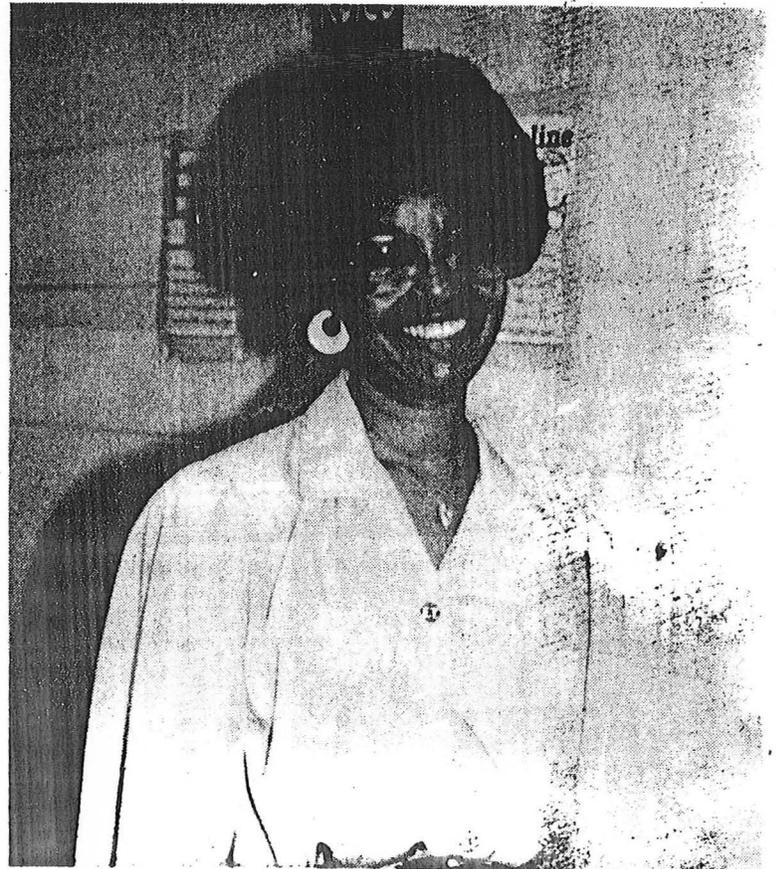
In elementary school I had a teacher who I thought was the meanest woman that I had ever met. But by the end of the year I learned how to stand up for what I believe in, to always try, to learn from my mistakes, and to be a responsible, prepared and cooperative student.

I can say now that I am a senior that my teachers have each molded me into a well-rounded student. I lay my successes and honors at their door, for without them I would not be the person I am today.

I have been so influenced by those hardworking dedicated teachers and administrators that I am majoring in elementary education in college.

My highest compliment goes to the teachers who allowed me to be creative in projects, different in book reports and original in writing assignments.

Heather Moler
Jefferson High School



"...Second only to parenting, I believe teaching is the most important profession because it is all-conclusive. All

A favorite teacher is a teacher who you can depend on for anything. She or he is very kind and understanding. A favorite teacher helps you correct your mistakes, and she shows you what's right and wrong.

Heather Long
Shepherdstown Elementary

When I was asked to write about my favorite teacher, I didn't think it was going to be this hard. South Jefferson Elementary has so many good teachers.

I guess it would be my fifth grade teacher. My teacher may have to get after me a lot, but my teacher is always fair. My teacher cares about all the kids in class. What I like best about my teacher is we get to go out sometimes when it's study hall. Plus we get bonus bucks to buy candy. When we have extra work that needs to be made up we sometimes go out.

I like my teacher very much.

Teddy Shifflett
South Jefferson Elementary

Dear Teacher:

I like the games we play like Fox in the Barnyard. I'm glad you're my gym teacher!

Your student,
Brandon French
Page Jackson Elementary

To many people, a teacher is just somebody who teaches students. It's true a teacher does teach students, but a teacher does much more. A teacher believes students can reach their goals if they try hard enough. She often is somebody who influences students to do well in school.

A teacher is somebody who expects her students to study hard and try their best. A teacher encourages her students by complimenting them on good work. A teacher also tries to help her students on work they are having trouble with. A teacher gives her students feedback on their work and this helps them know how they are doing in school. A teacher also helps students learn to think more creatively.

A teacher just can't be paid enough for everything they do for you and me. And finally, a teacher is a parent, a tutor, a nurse, a counselor and a friend all wrapped up in one.

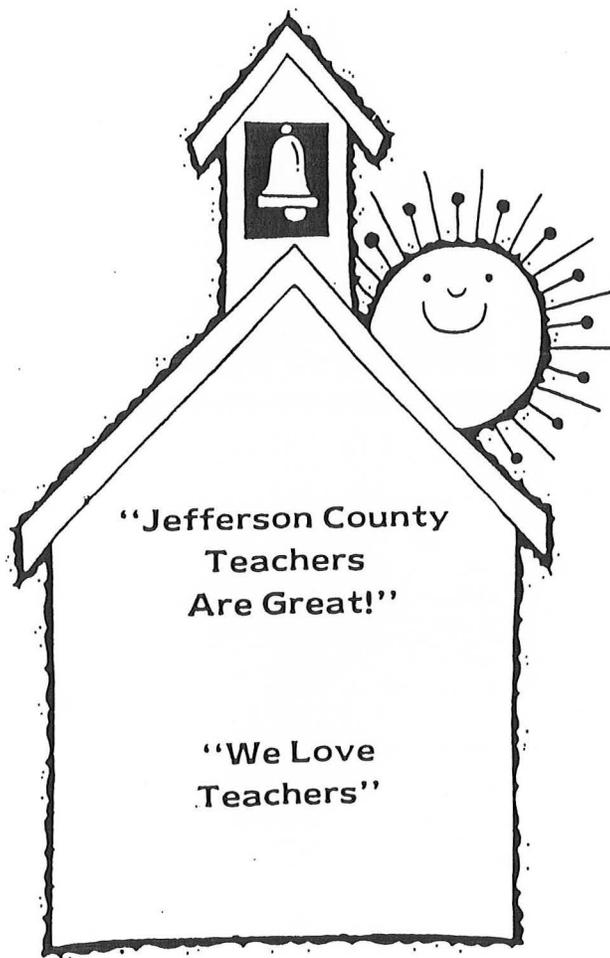
Kathy Stanford
C.W. Shipley Elementary

When I think of appreciation for a teacher, I think about the many things that teachers have done for me and other students. They teach them things, but more importantly, they help a young child grow. A teacher should be respected. A teacher appreciation day is needed; although every day should be teacher appreciation day.

Brad Keller
Shepherdstown Junior High

My fifth grade teachers at Wright Denny are special. They do neat activities like erosion experiments and fairy tale plays to make learning more enjoyable. My teachers let us earn extra privileges like parties, luncheons, and outside activities through good behavior in class. They are enthusiastic about the work they give. They give clear instructions when the lesson is new, and they help us prepare to study when it's time to take a test. I think I have great teachers!

Sara Lightner
Wright Denny Intermediate



My favorite teacher does lots of wonderful things. She expands the school book farther so that we understand more clearly. She does this by having people come in and going on field trips. She helps people to believe in themselves by having a royal rug and she's the purple princess. She even does the "Electric Slide."

Stephanie Grove
Ranson Elementary

To my teacher:

I like you a lot. You are nice and pretty. You always listen to us and answer our questions. You teach us a lot and make it lots of fun to learn. You teach us math and how to read. You always make us feel special. We love you.

Kelly Wilt
Blue Ridge Elementary



"...Second only to parenting, I believe teaching is the most important profession because it is all-conclusive. Almost everyone above the age of 5 has been exposed to, depended upon, and benefitted from the services of a teacher..."

"Teaching has made a contribution to every other profession..."

"Children come to school in all shapes, sizes, colors, ability levels, with various degrees of enthusiasm and with unbelievable baggage..."

My philosophy is that each of these students **can** and has a right to learn. I believe that if a child knows that you, as the teacher, are there with adequate help, you sincerely believe he **can** learn, you **encourage** him to learn, indeed you **expect** him to learn, make sure he succeeds and is rewarded for his efforts, **any child will learn...**"

VELMA TWYMAN
1990-1991 Jefferson County
Teacher of the Year