

CAPE Oak Grove Elementary Visual History Project
Interview with
Wallace Nelms
Oak Grove parent/grandparent and neighborhood resident
April 2, 2002

Good morning.

Good morning.

I'm Laverne Byas Smith. I know just about all of you. I'm David's mother. I know you. I am so pleased to be here this morning. When I first read about your community visual history project that Audrey Galax is doing with you I became so excited, because I love history and I am blessed to live in a community that is very rich in history. I'm delighted to be here this morning to introduce to you or to present to you a man I admire and respect very much. He happens to be the grandfather of Shawn Hickman and Matthew Nelms. He is a man who has lived in this neighborhood all of his life and more importantly for your project he is a man who loves stories. If you ever visit your home you will always get a story. He reflects on the past. He talks ... about the past. He likes to share information about the past. So when I read about your project I said I know the perfect person, I've got to call Audrey and introduce her to Mr. Wallace Nelms. I want you to greet him this morning and he is going to greet him this morning and he is going to greet you and share with you some of the information about life in the Oak Grove community in the 20th century. We are also pleased this morning to have his lovely wife Ms. Minonna Nelms who has also lived in the community for most of her life and she happens to be the family archivist I found out, which is a person who saves all the documents and the papers So Mr. Wallace Nelms.

Good morning.

Good morning.

Mr. Wallace you are going to tell us something about your family's background?

Yes, my mother was born in this community as were all of her 12 siblings. There were 13 in her family. My mother came to this community from Eufaula, Alabama. This is my grandmother, Matilda Stokes. This is my mother Laura Stokes. This is my mother's sister, Stella Stokes. They came here and started a large family, she married the guy that lived next door. Back then there wasn't really a guy next door because there were farms next to it. There was no such thing as a house here, a house there, they were farms. But if you go down Oak Grove Road now you see a lot of houses. Back then they were just hills. Life ... than it is now. You can see here, this is the home that I was born in. This house here. The commune was such that everybody raised everything they ate. You didn't go to the store to buy hardly anything. First of all, there weren't any stores. There were no stores. The only place there was a store was all the way into Decatur or all the way to Tucker or into Atlanta.

Now tell us what year you are talking about?

I'm talking about in the 1930's.

The 1930's.

As you can see there are cows, this is our front yard. We had ducks, we had goats, and we had chickens. That was the economy. That's the way that people lived there. It's quite different than it is now. As far as school was concerned, the average school day for me was like you get up in the morning, you had to feed the animals, you had to feed these ducks. Sometimes if you wanted some fresh milk you had to milk the cows and then you had to feed these animals. Then you went in the house and maybe had some breakfast and then you walked to school. The first school that

I went to was in this church. How many of you know where this church is? ...you do know where it is.

It looks a little different now doesn't it?

Mm-hmm.

I went to this school in the year 1937.

So you are saying the school was held in the church?

School was in the church. We didn't have a school per say at that time. The county did not provide a school for Black children in 1937 in DeKalb County. The only way we could have a school is we would have to ask the county to give us a teacher and if the county so desired and it was to their liking they would send us a teacher. When I started to school I was seven years old. I couldn't start to school in the primary grades because there just wasn't any school available. When we got a school in 1937 I started to school in that church. We went to school there for two years. Then we built a school in our neighborhood. We had to provide the lumber and the land to build a school on. The county provided a teacher for us.

Before you ... Mt. Zion Church School, could you tell us a little bit about how many students? How many students were in your school? You said you had one teacher.

That's right. There was one teacher that taught seven grades and you can imagine a school without any blackboards, because there weren't any blackboards. Can you imagine a school without any desks because there were not any desks. There were only church pews that we used to sit on. They were kind of hard really to get your lessons if you got to write on your lap of a church pew. That's the way we had to do it until we built our own school. We built our own school, but it was a one room building much like the church. Just a one room. This is the classroom---this is a classroom sitting where I was in school. This is me at that age. I was around oh 10 years old then.

10 years old. At some point we will let you file up and look at the pictures those of you who are in the back and can't see.

This is a classroom sitting and I hope you all will come and look at this. This is a one room school with one teacher ... that taught seven grades.

How many of you remember from---I know last year Social Studies you talked about segregation, about Jim Crowe? Anyone remember the session with Ms. Harris and ... I'm sure it will be discussed with you this year more about the history of the south. Does anyone remember Jim Crowe? The discussion about Jim Crowe and segregation. ... can you refresh our memory?

.....(Too far away from microphone, can't hear)

That's exactly right. That is exactly right. Segregation is ... history in the south where we had two separate societies going on. There were laws and rules that kept the races separate. Okay. So that was a period, it was established in the 19th century with a Supreme Court Decision ... vs. Ferguson that said you could have separate institutions as long as they were equal. And that was the rule in the south for years and years. The things were separate and they were supposed to be equal, but the way it played out in reality was that they kept the races separate, but things were often unequal. That's the period in which Mr. Wallace went to school here in the Oak Grove community. That's why he went to a separate school at Mt. Zion Church. And then while the community---the Mt.

Zion community had to build it's own one room school house, the county provided a teacher and sometimes the county would provide other facilities Mr. Wallace? Did they provide heaters?

The county provided us with one pot belly stove for the one room school, they provided a truck load of coal.

So the students would have---the parents would have to provide money---raise money to build the school. They would also have to---whatever other materials they would need, if there were blackboards, pencils. The books sometimes would come from the county, but the books were also---were used discarded books from the white schools in the area. I'm sorry continue Mr. Nelms.

Let me see where to start next.

Can you tell us---do you want to talk about the area?

The area here, yeah. If you look at this area ... a lot of you---how many of you know where Ed's used to be grocery store before they moved it. This is that area right---this is this area right here. This area here ... where you see Ed and ... this was a Black family that owned all of this property and sold it and it was developed into what's now Oak Grove Shopping Center. Go up this road here and come to right here is about where, you can't hear me?

Can you hear him in the back?

Can you hear me? Our church is probably somewhere in this area here right now. All these were---all this was farm land and there was very few homes. There were a few homes where you see smaller lots, actually they were not homes, a person had gone ahead and divided the lots up. They were really not homes.

What road is that? This is Lavista...

This is Lavista Road coming here.

Where would Richard Stokes be?

Mr. Stokes would be somewhere in this area here.

Running down here?

Mm-hmm.

Okay. So Ed's would be out here?

Mm-hmm.

But there was no Ed's there?

There was no Ed's there. There was business at all. There was only one store that was on the corner of Oak Grove and Lavista Road and it belonged to a Mr. Cheeks.

Mr. Cheeks? And where would that be? About here?

Yeah. It's not on this map, but you can't see Oak Grove Road on here. Right. Right.

Where would Leafmore be? Would this be the Leafmore community here?

Yeah. Mm-hmm. Yeah. Yeah.

And then this would go right along Oak Grove Road to Pangborn would be along in here?

Right. Right.

And so Good Pasture, what's Good Pasture?

There was a man named Good Pasture. That was a name. Uh-huh. It was a person's name. This is Richard Stokes. This is my mother's home. She lived here. My dad's property was here and they also owned the property that went here and extended on down past the--what is the old railroad area. His brother--there was two brothers, Will Nelms and Cliff Nelms and they owned properties adjacent each other. We were farmers so that's why you don't see any development on our property. They were entrepreneurs and they developed--the didn't develop it, they just cut it up in sections and sold off the lots. And the ... Oak family they were farmers and Edgar and ... were farmers. I'm sure you know some of these names. If you walk through the cemetery some times you'll see a lot of Rhodes, you'll see a lot of Nelms, but mostly Rhodes.

How many of you live near Danforth? Or Richard Stokes Drive? Your homes are now sort of in this area. Danforth would be around in here. Richard Stokes would run along here. Who lives in Oak Leaf Station? Is it called Leaf Station? What's the name of your community ...?

Oak Crossing.

Oak Crossing. Who lives in Oak Crossing? I always get the name of the community wrong. Oak Crossing. This would be over here. The neighborhood would be over in here. And who lives over in the Cove on Fairoaks ...? Is that on this map Mr. Wallace? That would be--would it be back over in here.

... Fairoak... Coral Wood would be in this area here.

Does anyone live near Coralwood? That would be over in this area.

(Cross talk)

So all these Stokes, these are all your relatives Mr. Wallace?

Most of them are my relatives, yeah. Yes.

This is great. Okay. So we talked about your early schooling at Mt. Zion AME and your school name--your elementary school ... that you finished at Mt. Zion School. Where was Mt. Zion School?

Mt. Zion School was right in back of where our family's lived at 1375 Nelms Drive.

So it would be over?

It would be hard for me to show that on here. But in this property here. It would be in this property here. It was near Nelms--it would be somewhere in this area right here.

Okay. So when you left Mt. Zion School, did you continue school Mr. Wallace?

Oh yeah. I went to Avondale High School for Negroes, which was in Scottdale, Georgia.

You went all the way to Scottdale?

Yes. We walked to Scottdale. There was no transportation for Black students at all. So we walked---we would get up early in the morning and we walked---let me see if I can tell you. Do you know where North Dekalb is?

North Dekalb Mall?

North Dekalb Mall, it is down North Druid Hills Road by North Dekalb, but there was no North Dekalb then of course and you would make a right turn and go up Highway 29 to what is now called George Wayne and cut across through there to go to Scottdale. There was a gray---let me see what can I say? The Scott family who was the big property owners, they owned all the property from ... Park to Scottdale and they owned the Scottdale General Store, which milled all the cotton in that area. So we walked through their property and they had a school over there for Blacks and it taught people from the first through the eleventh grade. But there was no transportation, the only way we could get there was to walk. My parents wanted us to get an education so we walked to school.

That was about four or five miles?

Probably about five, a little more than five miles and we would do it in about an hour and 20 minutes.

Can you imagine walking an hour and 20 minutes to school? Five miles.

We were late a lots of times in the winter time because in the winter time when the days were short we had to walk in the dark. It was dangerous walking along the roads then. Because a lots of times people see you walking along roads and they took their liberties with cars.

Wow, so that was the Avondale Elementary and High School?

Right.

Here is a picture of that high school in 1924. That was the high school ---elementary high school built for Black students in Avondale. There was no...

In Scottdale.

In Scottdale.

They called it Avondale Elementary and High School. It actually was in Scottdale.

In Scottdale?

Right.

Which is near the Farmer's Market? The Dekalb Farmer's Market? Or near that ... on Ponce de Leon?

It's nearer the steel mill on Ponce de Leon.

Do you know where that is? That steel mill on Ponce de Leon. Okay. Here we have a--- this is a listing of the 17 schools for Black students from 1944 to 1955 in Dekalb County.

There were 17 schools elementary and high schools and most of these schools were either housed in churches or they were in ... like Mt. Zion School that the community of Black people got together raised money or with their hands built the building for the children for the schools. There were 17 schools there. Two high schools Mr. Nelms?

Three.

Three high schools. The others some were combination high schools like Avondale was. What year did you finish high school Mr. Wallace?

I finished high school in 1947. Yeah.

You were remember it well?

Oh yeah, I remember it real well. This was a...school there. I had never gone to a school where there was more than one room. So to move from---change classes to go from one room to another that was just like---oh that was like Christmas to me. When you have seven grades all in one room.

Wow.

I didn't realize how blessed we were to be able to go from a one room school to a school like this.

In those one room schools did you have bathrooms?

No, we had outside toilets.

Outside ... did you have running water?

No running water. No lunch rooms or anything.

But at Avondale did you have bathrooms in the school?

No. We didn't have water inside the school either at Avondale. We had a well at Avondale, but we didn't have a well at Mt. Zion. We had to bring the water in jars to school when I was in elementary school.

You had to bring water in jars?

Yes.

Wow. Well things changed a little bit in DeKalb County in 1946, the year just before you graduated. There was a new constitution, county constitution and they changed the way the school systems were run. Before 1946 you had each school having its own governing board of trustees and superintendent. Can you imagine having a Superintendent of Schools for Oak Grove and they make all the decisions and they raise money for the school? In 1946 you had the establishment of a consolidated county school system, one county superintendent and that changed things a lot. You still had segregated schools. It was still Jim Crowe, still segregated, but you had one county superintendent working to raise the money for the schools, one board overseeing the schools---all of the schools Black schools and the White schools and you start having improvements done in the Black schools. One of the reasons the county started making improvements was because they wanted to live up to the separate but equal law. They wanted to maintain the separateness so they knew because of things happening in national government that they were coming under scrutiny. They had to improve the conditions of Black education in the

county. One of the first things they did which really made a difference to people like Mr. Wallace who had to walk five miles to high school every day was they bought a bus and provided bus transportation for the Black students to ride to school instead of walking five miles and that was---in 1948 this is a picture of the very first bus. Mr. Wallace you had some reflections on how a bus system, you were already out of school, but you told me about a Mr. Foster in this neighborhood.

Right. There was a Reverend Foster who it was his job to go around to all the Black communities and to gather all the students and bring them to centrally located Black schools.

So he was the bus driver?

He was a bus driver. Right.

The first bus driver in this area?

First bus driver, yes ma'am.

This is a picture of Hamilton High School. Hamilton High School was a new Black school. That's the second major improvement that happened after 1946 when the county wide system started improving conditions of Black education in the county. They put these 17 schools ... one room schools, they are in churches, they are in old buildings and they built five---is it five---there were six new schools, there were five elementary and three high schools. Some of them were combination elementary and high schools. They built brand new schools specifically for the Black students in Dekalb County. There was Bruce Street School, County Line School---raise your hand if you recognize any of these names. There are at least one or two that are still schools. Hamilton High School, which this is a picture of in the 1940's and there is a beautiful tall wide eyed lady here who happens to be sitting at the table. She was a teacher at Hamilton High School in the 1940's. There was Lynnwood Park, which was an elementary and high school. Victoria Simmons Elementary School and Robert Shaw Elementary School. You've heard of Robert Shaw. You've heard of Robert Shaw, well it's open again. These were the six schools that were built in the mid 1950's. Brand new. Brand new schools built so that Black students could have what approached more like separate but equal as opposed to unequal schooling. Mr. Wallace, do you remember any of those schools?

Oh yeah I remember. I know each one of those schools. The Bruce Street School was in Lithonia, the County Line School was in an area---in the South Dekalb area. What's that area called over there? I can't remember the area. But Hamilton was in Scottdale. Lynnwood Park was in the Brookhaven area of Dekalb County. Victoria Simmons Elementary was in Stone Mountain and Robert Shaw of course was in Scottdale and it still is and right now it is a theme school.

It's a theme school.

It's a theme school.

It reopened as a theme school. That's right. Now Hamilton High School was basically Avondale, is that right Ms. Minonna. It was Avondale Elementary and High School that was rebuilt.

Yeah.

And renamed Hamilton High School. Robert Shaw Elementary School was the first elementary schools for your children, was it not Mr. Wallace?

Yes. It was the first elementary school for Sybil, Cheryl and Donna.

How many children do you have Mr....

I have six children. The latter of my children though went to Oak Grove and my youngest one went to Coral Wood.

So Sybil, Cheryl and Donna went in the first five grades for Sybil and Cheryl to Robert Shaw and they went---your first three children went to Robert Shaw in their early grades.

Right.

When did your children enter Oak Grove?

In '65.

And you have...could you tell us which of your children came to Oak Grove?

Minonna who came to Oak Grove?

....

In what year?

1965.

1965. So what specifically---what brought you to Oak Grove? Why did you leave Robert Shaw and come to Oak Grove?

Because the law was handed down that you child ...In their neighborhood and Oak Grove was the closest school that we had and Mr. Foster came and got them and

Okay. And I need to back up. Who remembers Brown vs. Board of Education raise your hand? Who has heard of Brown vs. Board of Education raise your hand? That was 1954. It was a Supreme Court decision wasn't it? Do you recall---can anyone---I have pride for you if you can remember this. What was that decision? 1954 Brown vs. Board of Education? Patrick.

That both Black and White childrengo to the same school.

You tried. That was the decision that said separate schools were inherently unequal and that they needed and that school systems in the south needed to abolish their separate systems of schooling and consolidate their schools and that Black children and White children should go to school together. That's basically what happened. The decision was handed down in 1955, but many of the southern states sort of took their time even though the Supreme Court said make this happen with all deliberate speed. They took their time kind of making sure that the speedy was quite that speedy. So all through the 50's we still had in DeKalb County two separate systems although they were still trying improve the Black schools separately. It wasn't until the 1960's that DeKalb County responded after a court order. First they've had a freedom of choice plan. They said anybody can go to any school they want too. Well, the same court came back after someone challenged it. Actually the District Court came back and said no, the freedom of choice plan isn't going to work, but there has to be a different plan. There has to be a neighborhood school attendance plan in DeKalb County and that's when Ms. Minonna and Mr. Wallace took their

first three, four children out of Robert Shaw Elementary School and brought them over to Dekalb County because that was their neighborhood school. After all they only lived a mile away...

A mile and a half.

A mile and a half away as opposed to Robert Shaw which is about five miles away. So Cheryl, Sybil and Donna---Cheryl and Sybil came in fifth grade, Donna came in third grade. Wallace and Holly came in first grade to Oak Grove. Do you have any recollections of their first years at Oak Grove?

Oh yeah, I was glad that they were here because it made it a lot easier for them although they brought some problems---their transition getting to know students, finding students who really liked them and would interact with them was a little difficult. Especially for Holly and Donna. But they got along all right. They finally got along okay.

And Mr. Wallace and Ms. Minonna have graciously shared the report cards from Oak Grove Elementary and some school days pictures from Oak Grove Elementary. Ms. Minonna do you want to share your memories of coming up to Oak Grove?

.....(too far away) Parents got together and played softball out in the ... I think I hadbut it was wonderful Oak Grove.

In 1967 Coral Wood Elementary was built, because of overcrowding. Oak Grove got really crowded as all these subdivisions---housing subdivisions were built. They built Coral Wood Elementary, do you know where that is? The Coral Wood School and the Mt. Zion neighborhood then was transferred from Oak Grove Elementary to Coral Wood Elementary in 1967. So that---do you have a question? Any questions for Mr. Wallace? ...you had a question.

.....(too far away)

... Mt. Zion.

The church that we went---the school that we---are you talking about the two churches in our neighborhood.

Which one did you go too?

I went to school in the one over on Lavista Road. The new one that just got built was the older church that the new church replaced.

What time did you get out of school?

We got out of school at the regular time around 2:30 or 3:00 o'clock. The same as you guys.

What time did you start?

8:30.

.....

Say that a little bit louder.

Did you get a little bit of a shorter time...

Well, we didn't have to spend as much time in school as you guys do.

...

What time do you guys start?

8:20 3:30.

Did you go to school year round Mr. Wallace?

Oh yes. Oh yeah. ... In some parts of the southeast people didn't go to school year round, but in Dekalb County we did. Some parts of Gwinnett County students didn't go to school the year round because parents needed the children to help them do agricultural work in the fields. So until all the crop was in they didn't go to school. They usually started to school way over in October. The latter part of October.

Wow. Any other questions? Patrick?

Was Oak Grove the same size as it is now or did they add on to it?

The school itself? Do you know what year Oak Grove was built?

1958.

1958.

I don't know if they have made any addition to the school proper. Do you all have any trailers here?

Yes.

Trailers? Outside classrooms?

Portables?

Portables.

That's the addition. He is saying that's the addition. So the building structure itself is the way it was built in 1958.

Yes.

...

What?

...

Oak Grove Elementary.

I can't say---I worked nights so I never attended any PTA but wife can answer that.

Was it air conditioned in 1958? Probably not.

.....

I wouldn't know the answer to that. Why is the roof flat of school buildings? That's a good question.

I guess for economic reasons. It cost a whole lot more money to ... roof and it would cost more money to put the roofing material on than to have a flat surface and have somebody come in and put tar on it is cheap. It's for economic reasons.

...surface.

How long ...

We didn't have a... we had a ... I guess about 30 minutes, but at that time you could go outdoors and play, but lunch such as you guys know it didn't exist. Because we only brought what we brought in a paper sack to school and many of us didn't have lunch. We just waited until we got back home and had something to eat then.

.....

Oh yeah, sure we did. Geography was one of my better subjects and History was one of my better subjects. Math, I was mediocre.

.....

The walls were quite different from what they are in contemporary schools. We just had a plain tack board wall, which was one by sixes nailed together, no insulation in the wall and we finally got a blackboard ... We got a blackboard. That was the only blackboard we had in the whole school in seventh grade.

.....something about a time capsule that is buried near where the flag ... Do you know anything about that?

Time capsule.

.....

In the old Oak Grove School? Old Oak Grove School.

The one that I went too? Of course, we had libraries. We had---first of all, let me tell you this, we had teachers I mean really a lot. Teachers who went to other ... to their friends to buy books, because the county did not furnish library books for us. Our teachers were dedicated teachers who went to their friends and got books to bring to our school.so they couldn't afford to buy books and nobody took magazines so we ... out to the newspapers. He's talking about in the 30's. When I ask---who was I asking about the ... I said you all wouldn't be concerned about ... 20 years ago. ... 20 years ago. Our country was in the worst depression that it's ever been in. We think the depression that we just went through when we had the 911 situation where the stock market dropped, in 1929 it was much worse than that. We were---nobody had anything. So to have a library---as a matter of fact, our teachers even took us on tours. We went to the Atlanta Daily World tour. We had our own school newspaper in this one room school.

That's great.

We sure did. We had a ... we were a ... but we had teachers who really loved us and knew that if we were going to make it so they had to go the extra mile to provide us with everything that they could to help us make it in the world that we had to live in.

Mm-hmm.

So we were blessed. And I think you people have some very good teachers in this school, which I hear Oak Grove is one of the better schools in the county, which means that you guys study a lot.

Is that true?

No.

No. It is true that you have good teachers and that some of you it's true that you study a lot, right?

Yeah.

She has a question.

Katie and then ...

.....

When you were growing up ...

Big news was ... first of all,

The flag on the wall...

On the wall, yeah. It was very important that we had to discuss current events. All of our teachers from Ms. Lottie Jones who was our first teacher to Ms. Sadie Oliver, to Ms. Helen W. Moore who was a teacher here. They was very concerned about us being abreast of what was going on in the world. Even though our parents didn't have newspapers, even though none of us had radios, they made a point--she made a point of bringing papers and periodicals to school so that we knew what was happening in the world. So we were aware of current events.

Just a minute... right here.

.....

Can you speak a little louder?

.....

What was his job?

What did I do after...

...

You mean after I finished school or what did I do after I got out of school each day?

After you finished school.

Oh. After I finished school I went to work at General Motors in Doraville. I retired from General Motors as a matter of fact.

In school, who was your favorite teacher?

A favorite teacher in school.

My favorite teacher in school, in elementary school it would be Ms. Sadie May Oliver. In high school it would be Mr. William Patton.

Ms. Oliver is still alive?

Ms. Oliver is still alive and she is at A.G. Rowe's Home what is that street? Boulevard. She is in her 90's now.

Mr. Wallace, often--I hear him often talking about going to see Ms. Oliver his school teacher. He goes to visit her still today. I guess we are getting short on time. One more question.

.....

.....

Is Ms. Oliver ... grandma?

I don't think so. She was from North Carolina.

Oh. Why did you like Ms. Oliver

He was asking why did you like Ms. Oliver so much? Your favorite teacher.

You touch a very sensitive part of me when you say that. I promised that I would not cry.

Another question.

You will find that there will be teachers---in your quest for education you are going to find that there are going to be teachers that are going to touch some ... parts of your life and don't take it for granted that every teacher is going to be the same. Some are going to be very special to you and you remember them until the day you leave the earth. She was one of those type of teachers who always believed that you could do it. She challenged you at all subjects in Math, in History, in Geography and Social Studies. She read, she kept abreast of everything. Even up to now she still reads and she is a wonderful person. It is nice to look up to somebody who really is concerned about you. If you've got a teacher like that you are blessed. In high school and elementary school, college or even in your further studies if you decide to go ... there is always going to be somebody who is going to have that little special edge and you are going to zero on it. Remember that they love you and care about you and give them the utmost respect that you possibly can. I didn't intend to cry on you guys. But she was very special to me and still is.

Do you have any more questions? Are you ready to come up and look at the pictures? Thank you all you have been great.