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G. V. Stewart

Garland V. Stewart

Black History Research Project of Tampa

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G.V. Stewart: I was born in Atlanta, Georgia, and attended the public schools there. After completing high school at Booker T. Washington, I matriculated at Atlanta University. Atlanta University in 1932 was integrated into the Atlanta university system, which comprised Morehouse [College], Atlanta University undergraduate school—which became a graduate school, Clark [Atlanta University]—Spellman [College], and Morris Brown [College]. We completed our work for there after the merger, and those students that could go elsewhere did so and those of us that couldn't went to Morehouse, because Morehouse has been the chief adversary. Most of us disliked Morehouse because of the athletic competition that existed through the years.

After completing my college work at Morehouse in business administration, I saw a job in the field of accounting and was given a job in Jacksonville by the Afro-American [Life] Insurance Company as a junior audit. They sent me to Tampa to work with the Tampa Insurance Company as a junior audit, and they sent me to Tampa to work with the Tampa branch. After I got here in 1932, the salary was extremely low, and in order to supplement my salary I had to get out and write insurance also, which I did. And then a Scott, a young newspaper man in Atlanta, Georgia who ran the *Atlanta Rural* came through and encouraged myself and several others to start a weekly newspaper view, which he would print and send to us and we could distribute it. By working with this newspaper we became interested in the criticisms of the school system.

Fred Beaton: What was the name of the newspaper?

GVS: The newspaper was called the *Tampa Daily World*—not the *Daily World*, the *Tampa World*. And so we published this paper, and getting into the newspaper business you get interested in many subjects, and of course we became particularly interested in the field of education because of so many criticisms that were coming to us from many

sources. And we would write articles criticizing school system: not knowing, really in debt, we—uh, real causes. We were publishing more rumor than we were facts at that time, but it was effective.

One of the supervisors at that time, a Mr. Hale, invited me in to chat because I had put in my application for a school teacher job, and he asked me if I wanted to get a job in the school system, and I told him, “Yes.” Well, being young at that time, I was pretty naive about how things worked at the upper levels. I was asked to sever my connection with the newspaper, now knowing that perhaps some of my articles had miffed them and irritated them, 'cause really, I could easily see why they would have, because they were really not factual articles. I just had one side and that was it, but I agreed to resign from the newspaper and join the school system in the latter part of 1932, thirty-three [1933]. And from that point on, I went on to enjoy a very enjoyable tenure in the school system for forty-two years.

FB: Can you describe historically the condition confronted the black students in Tampa?

GVS: Yes. Although at that time I was [not] aware of it, I can review the situation for you. So many things that existed at that time and were accepted because we as blacks really had no knowledge of standards and what should have been. We were brainwashed, when you think in terms of a war-time view. We thought we were getting a pretty good deal, most of us, because we just didn't know. We had several elementary schools that were poorly staffed and (inaudible). We had one senior high school. In fact, at the time I was connected with double sessions: junior high school in the morning, and senior high in the afternoon.

We had the usual program of four or five subjects: math, social studies, science, and then two electives. We had no gymnasium, extremely limited playing facilities for our students, poor laboratories, and poor accommodations for vocational education. But we did have in our favor a spirit and a desire to take advantage of what we had. Which I think in some instances was and is superior to some of the attitudes that I see around today. Although we had by way of a screening system. I think that most of the uninterested students dropped out earlier than they do now because we didn't have or we may not have had the compulsory law, but they weren't enforced. And therefore, the screening was much better, which perhaps made for some approach to academics.

FB: What was the dominant position of black parents during the thirties [1930s] towards education?

GVS: Well, I think most black parents didn't know exactly what it was they wanted for their children; we simply knew that education was a way out of the situation in which they found themselves. Most of the jobs—I'll say at least 80 percent—were in the reading fields and domestic fields, and most blacks realized if in some way they could get an education they could beat that type of field and—although the career market and job markets was very limited to blacks. I knew at that time blacks had finished college were into domestic work. Not only that, if you check the records you'll find that most bellhops

and redcaps—many of those people were highly trained, but they couldn't get jobs.

FB: Can you name some of the pioneer teachers or some of the teachers that started out with you?

GVS: Well, there was Mrs. Bryant. Mrs. Meacham, for which Meacham Elementary School is named. There was Longward, principal at Harlem Elementary School. There was Howard Blake; Howard Blake Junior High was named for him. J.W. Lockhard. There was Edward Rops, or Roth, who was at that time principal of Dunbar Elementary School. And we had several women. C. B. Bryant, principal over the senior high school. That's all I can think of right now.

You might say that when I came to Tampa we did not have over twenty-five people we could use, if that many. We had at that time an examination process by which teachers could qualify for teaching certificated by way of examination, and this was given once or twice a year. Of course, the situation improved as the years went along, and standards were elevated.

FB: Mr. Stewart, can you tell us a little about Christina Meacham?

GVS: I know very little about Christina Meacham because I taught at the high school even in my earlier years, and really was not interested in elementary education. In fact, I didn't know too much about it. And yet, my first school out at Robles Pond was an elementary school, and the person that was teaching with me there, Mrs. Butler, was really running the school. The people thought I was running it. I had the time, which she had the knowledge, I knew very little about elementary education—in fact, I knew very little about any education, frankly.

FB: Mr. Stewart, was there a high exploitation rate at this time?

GVS: Well, we had students and parents that respected the school and its staff and its program. We in the teaching profession felt that it was our duty to do everything within our power to keep the students in school and not to push them out. An individual had to be almost incorrigible before he was sent home. We tolerated students that many of today's educators would not even think about tolerating. But we were trying to keep the kids in school.

FB: Concerning teachers' pay, when you first started out, do you remember how much you were making?

GVS: Well, the first job I made fifty-five dollars per month, and at my first principalship at Robles Pond I was making eighty dollars per month. And then when I went to Dunbar they raised my salary to ninety-seven dollars per month. And these were unequal salaries, I might say, when compared to the white personnel. Now, I might say that whites weren't making too much either, although they were making as much as two-thirds and perhaps double that of what we were making. In addition to that, we had no salary schedules at

that time. Officials—the administration, perhaps as I see it—now had the discretion to pay almost what they wanted to.

FB: Did you take part in the teacher's organization?

GVS: Oh, yes. In fact, I was treasurer of the teacher's organization. Ben D. Griffin was at that time president, and we were the first ones to employ the lawyer in Jacksonville to take our case to the courts.

FB: Do you remember the name of the lawyer?

GVS: I think I can remember it; he's dead now. But we first wrote a letter to the board, because the lawyer recommended that we exhaust all local entities. And then after the board—at that time, Will Robinson was our superintendent, and he ignored the letter, of course, and then we moved on to the courts. We had our personnel suing the school board, at that time a Mrs. Hilliard Turner, who was a teacher at the high school teaching social studies; she was the first person to sue the school board here in the South.

FB: What was—?

GVS: Well, we asked the school board—I might say prior to that, Edward Davis, president of the Central Life Insurance Company. He was also in the school system; he was principal of Lomax. And Mr. Davis was in the forefront because he was president of our local organization even prior to Ben Griffin, and he was the first man to write the school board because some statistics had come out from the State Department showing the relationship of salaries in this country and throughout the state. And Davis simply asked about the situation, and asked the school board to make some adjustment for black teachers and for himself, particularly—and for this he was fired. He was demoted from principal of Lomax [Elementary School] to a position at Robles Pond, which was a two teacher school at that time. Of course he didn't accept the assignment. Instead, he accepted a job in Ocala.

Now, getting back to the case, we simply provided the lawyer with all the information that he required and they had a trial here in which Thurgood Marshall and a local attorney—I can't recall his name—joined in to prosecute the case, and we won the case. The court ordered that they equalize the salaries of blacks and whites. Of course, they tried a number of schemes prior to that; they attempted to develop a salary schedule based on what they called merit, and this merit was based on some type of an evaluation which was set up with the principal and supervisors. They even threatened to give tests to justify the position in which they may have put—or given—a person or teacher.

FB: What do you think was the educational salvation of the black students in the thirties [1930s] and forties [1940s] as opposed to the sixties [1960s] and seventies [1970s]? Was he getting a better degree of education then as opposed to now, with the conditions that he was under?

GVS: Well, are you speaking of after integration? Yes, well, it is a moot question by that. I mean, I really don't know, but I can give you an opinion. I know this is a transition period, and both blacks and whites are adjusting to a new method of educating children. There were some advantages in the segregated setup, and those were coherences, the desire of the black teachers to certainly salvage every potentially good student so that we would not lose him or her to the vicissitudes of life. And I don't think that this exists in the new setup. I don't think that white teachers have ever been as dedicated to saving young people as blacks, because of the type of situation. We had to save these these young blacks because they were our future. They were the ones who were going to help pull us up by our own boot strings.

Well, whites have never had this problem, and therefore they didn't have to get out and push an individual to get an education. They simply provided it, then they motivated to the best of their knowledge. But to get out and go to homes at night and call mothers and fathers and tell them what they must do to save Johnny and so forth.

Now, I was saying that there were many advantages in the segregation system. But now, when you look at the overall picture and the future of education, certainly the integration system is best, because when we have passed the transition period, to get things in perspective so that we can get segregation behind us and then young whites and blacks can sit in class rooms with equal staff, facilities, goals and opportunities and make America a better place in which to live. But there are too many of us at this point who are scarred with the evidence and training in segregation system must die out like myself and whites have to die and get off the scene and then education in America and in the South. I believe we'll be even better than it is anywhere in this country.

FB: What effect do you think that the closing of Blake and Middleton will have on the black student, administrators and alumni as a whole?

GVS: Well, when you've been together for a long time, somewhat like a family set up. Blacks have been enslavees of schools like Blake [High School], Middleton [High School], Marshall High and some others, and we were a family. We knew one another and competed among ourselves, and enjoyed ourselves in attempting to advance by way of education by social behavior, church and civic activities in a segregation pattern. Now, when these schools were closed it did something to our psyche. We were hurt because our identity was being removed to some extent.

So we were injured, and now we've got to adjust to a new pattern of things. Since 80 percent of the whites are bussed, we had to do more of the adjusting than the whites, which this aspect of it they don't realize. Most of the black parents have to journey out of their communities into white communities to become identified with the educational program when at one time we identified with the educational program within our community. This has done something to us. When you journey out of your community—as it is today, when he gets over here, where he's been a majority he now becomes a minority, and he's got to adjust to minority status, and this is not always easy. Where he was president of a PTA [Parent Teacher Association], he's now only a number.

Also, the teaching has a problem and particularly the white handout teachings. Whereas the white teacher has been accustomed to a certain type of behavior from his or her students, particularly with respect to authority. This same thing has existed in the black schools but we have learned to tolerate it. There was just as much aggressiveness and disrespect for authority in the black schools as we have presently in the white schools by black students. But the black student [that] would use profane language in my presence was handled in a very different manner than which the average white teacher would handle such a matter, because we understood it. We knew where it was coming from and it was our job to try and correct it, rather than all times attack it and punish it.

Now, I have been separated from many of the white teachers because of this. In coming in contact with many white students, you will find that they are extreme in their behavior, and whites will get rid of them right now quicker than we will, because it's something that we can correct, for instance. When I left the school system, we had about twenty-five black principals, one hundred and thirty schools, one hundred and five white principals. Then the schools where you had suspensions and expulsions, they came from the one hundred five. Less than 2 percent came from the twenty-five, because they always felt that they could handle the situations. In many instances they found out they couldn't, but until they found out they couldn't. That was the only time they were removed. But white principals would suspend and expel over charges—not minor charges—that were not grace enough to warrant the type of punishment that many of them handed out.

FB: How about the displacement of black officials after the 1970s?

GVS: Well, I knew this was going to happen when the schools were integrated, and it is not happened for the reasons we may think. I don't think it was a purposeful design on the part of the administrators of the school system. As a matter of fact, I know it wasn't, because I happened to have been there. Actually, they were trying to hold blacks and encourage them to stay with the school system as that we could have qualified educators and good starts.

But you see, what really happened is that the labor market and the career market broke open, and here we are having been fastened almost for years into compulsory teaching, if you want to put it that way. The average educated person, unless he was a professional—when I say professional, I mean went into medicine or dentistry and he came out with a degree—he was forced to seek teaching as a respectable position.

So it was a marketplace that changed the situation, and now you will notice that the more qualified blacks are seeking everything other than teaching because we have been disenfranchised toward teaching. I expect this to finally diminish as we go into these opportunities that are open to us after a while. It will be just like athletics. If you recall, when they opened up athletics to blacks there was a flood of blacks, particularly in baseball. Teaching is a very enjoyable profession, and as soon as these jobs are filled by blacks—which will take some time, like the whites in the same type of percentages—you'll find that they'll be back into teaching.

FB: What I was concerned with was—during integration we had black officials that were principals promoted to assistant principals and coaches promoted to assistant coaches.

GVS: Oh, yes, this happened.

FB: Was this part?

GVS: Yes, this was a part of the process of changing the system over. Naturally, the blacks would feel discriminated against and he was. The white officials couldn't bring themselves to place a black principal. Let's say there are two schools, a black and white high school, and the black principal is a well-trained individual with a masters degree from, let us say, Chicago University [University of Chicago], and the white principal is a person, a graduate from University of Florida with a masters and three years of experience, and they have got to merge these two institutions, it is almost impossible.

end of transcript