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[Transcriber's Note: The Interview begins mid-sentence.]

Fred Beaton: —can hear the question?

Christine Thomas: Well, as I told you I was born here, and my school days began in the first College Hill school, which was located over on—it's over where Mr. Lee Davis' old home is. I don't know whether—I think it's over on Twenty-Third Street and Chick Road. It was next to the home of Mr. and Mrs. A.J. Grant. It was about—I'd say it had about three or four rooms; it was a wooden structure. I attended that school in the first, second and third grades. The enrollment outgrew the size of the school, and at that time the whites were going to school at the school that is now called Lomax [Elementary School]. It was Gilchrist Elementary School at the time.

And when I was in the third grade, they moved us from the old College Hill school to the Gilchrist Elementary, which is now Lomax. I attended school there until I was in the sixth grade and my family moved over on the other side of town. Then I went to Harlem [Elementary School]; it was on Harrison [Street] and Morgan [Street]. I went there one year in the sixth grade. Mrs. Christina Meacham was my principal. And after I finished the sixth grade, I went back to Lomax—the name was still Gilchrist. I went back there for the seventh grade, and I stayed there until I completed the twelfth grade.

But it was during that period the name of the school was changed, and it was named after a bishop of the AME [African Methodist Episcopal] Zion Church, Bishop [Thomas Henry] Lomax. Then from that day until now it has been called Lomax School. I finished Lomax in 1925, high school, and that was the last year it was a high school. That's when Booker Washington became Booker Washington High School, and Meacham [Elementary School] was built as an elementary school to take care of the overcrowded situation over there. And it was called Christina Meacham Elementary School, after Mrs. Christina Meacham, who was the first principal of the school on that side of town. She

was a principal at Harlem. (inaudible)

Now that's that part of it.

FB: Where did you go to college?

CT: I went to college at Florida A & M [Agricultural & Mechanical University]. I completed my first two years, and then I went to Hampton Institute [University] and finished my next two years.

FB: What were the conditions of blacks during that time?

CT: Well, you can imagine. It wasn't too—we had to scuffle. Because—now, when I finished high school, I didn't go right off to college. During that time they had what you would call a teacher's examination, and when I finished the twelfth grade I took the teacher's examination and passed. I finished school in May, I took the teacher's examination in September, and in January 1926, I started to work, and I started teaching out at Robles Pond. There was a little school out there, it had two rooms; it was a two teacher school. Miss Pearl Holmes was my principal. I taught the first and second grades, and she taught the third, fourth, fifth and sixth grades. And I would teach and I would go on and get my college education in summer school, that's the way I got it.

So, you can imagine how conditions were then.

FB: Okay, can you give us a brief description of Harlem and the Harlem School?

CT: Harlem Elementary School? Well, Harlem School was one of the first schools that was built here, and it was a brick structure, the first school that I remember. Of course my mother says that she attended there too, in the old Harlem, but the first one I remember was the brick structure and it was located, you know—do you remember? It was three stories, had three stories, and it was pretty well built for the time.

FB: Do you remember anything about the Depression in Tampa? Can you tell us?

CT: Yes, I remember the Depression; it was very hard. That's when they had the different services for the people.

FB: Like the soup lines?

CT: I don't remember too much about the soup line; maybe I didn't live around that area, you know. But they had—I would hear them talking about it.

Shirley Smith: You started teaching in 1925?

CT: Twenty-six [1926].

SS: Twenty-six [1926]. (phone rings) What school did you teach at?

CT: Robles Pond School.

SS: Was this a white school?

CT: No, all black. We didn't have any integration during that time.

FB: Were blacks harassed a whole lot in Tampa?

CT: No, I've never been harassed. The living conditions here, as far as the relations was—of the two races—have never been bad. There were certain sections here—now, you take Sulphur Springs, Jackson Heights, places like that, they weren't as nice as they could have been, but as far as harassment, there weren't any harassment among the two races here. Because one thing about it—we've always had Latins.

FB: Okay. What about any lynchings; do you know anything about that?

CT: No, I don't know anything about lynchings.

SS: What about the businesses that were on Central [Avenue]?

CT: What about them?

SS: Can you tell us a bit about them?

CT: Well, they were the usual businesses (laughs). The typical Negro businesses, you know; you can imagine. For that time, I imagine some of them were considered good. Doctor's offices, we had—Dr. (inaudible) White's office was over the Greek Stand, on the corner of Scott [Street] and Central [Avenue]. Dr. [Reche Reden] Williams' office was on the other corner, over—it was first over a theater, the Little Savoy theater. Dr. Edison built the first—supposed to have been—office building down there with professional men in it; it was on Central, just a bit above Scott Street, and Dr. Edison, Dr. Silas and Dr. Irvin had their offices there. And the public library, Negro library, was there, and it was operated by Mrs. Henry Maddox, and in later years, after she passed away, Mrs. Ada Paine. And the other businesses down Central there, they came along, you can imagine. There was Kid Mason, different bars and places down there.

FB: (inaudible)

CT: No, I didn't teach any integration. After I retired they integrated. The year that I retired was the year integration ended my school. I was replaced with white. That was in 1967. They were just beginning to come in as a teaching and aide situation, but the children hadn't started to come in yet to the Negro school.

FB: Okay. How would you categorize the attitudes of the black student say in the thirties

[1930s] and forties [1940s] with those in the fifties [1950s] and say in the sixties [1960s]?

CT: Well, I don't know about the attitudes, because at that time the attitudes didn't seem to be the same as those of the period that you're speakin'.

FB: More (inaudible) it was harder to teach—

CT: No, the children at that time didn't have the attitudes to other teachers as they had during this period now.

Ulysses Thomas: They hadn't integrated around sixty-seven [1967].

CT: No, they hadn't integrated during that time, but the children were beginning to—it seemed that they were feeling something, that they—maybe they were feeling their independence and beginning to get this attitude. And see, my teaching experience dealt with elementary children, and I didn't have too much to do with the teenagers. And in that way, I don't think I could tell you too much about their attitudes, except for my one child.

FB: Okay, what was the learning facilities like when you started?

CT: Well, the learning facilities were nothing like they should have been. Everything we had, that we used, was something that we had to look out for ourselves.

UT: Had to improvise.

CT: Had to buy them and improvise.

UT: And even when they built something—when they built somethin' for Negroes (inaudible). Blake [High School] was built in fifty-six [1956], and that was the only high school since Middleton. And I opened Blake in fifty-six [1956], and they didn't have a science department, they didn't have a decent library, they didn't have an auditorium and cafeteria—that's a combination—they didn't have a chapel, set aside for nothin' but religious and that kind of exercise. We had a plan there, we had a whole lot of religious exercises in there. Children play (inaudible) and they did everything in that auditorium. So, there was (inaudible) set aside, that type of thing. You understand what I'm talkin' about. This was brought to their attention back in fifty-six [1956].

When they built Chamberlain [High School], no resemblance when the buildings were built. So they weren't plannin' in the layout for the schools to be all equal. Whatever went on with Chamberlain, you understand? And so until integration of the children—and Blake was a million dollar industry, so they say, during that time. That was the best that they had built for the Negro, and that came nowhere near being equal to the plan since we had only two high schools, Middleton and Blake. Then they—Middleton (inaudible) school (inaudible). Blake was nothin' but black, Hillsborough, Plant, Chamberlain, which was built at the same time as Middleton. Blake (inaudible). So they wasn't thinkin' about equal opportunities, even in 1956.

All this has been brought out 'cause (inaudible) Blake and (inaudible). Then they got appropriations for nine rooms to be built, to be added on to Blake, which is now called Just [Elementary School]. Those rooms was supposed to have been added on to Blake, but they spent so much of the appropriations on the white and nothin' for the Negroes, they decided they better take those nine rooms and put an office over there and call it a school, just to say they built another school out of those rooms. But in reality, that was everything that was (inaudible) and Just was an addition to Blake, those nine rooms. And I don't—I think it's like that now, isn't it Just and Blake? Or is it combined now?

FB: No, it's still Just and Blake.

UT: That's the way that happened. So we didn't get the addition that they had intended for us, those nine rooms they built over there, because they took that and made a junior high school out of it.

FB: Okay, Mr. Thomas, you said you opened Blake. Were you the principal?

UT: Yeah.

FB: This was in 1956?

UT: Fifty-six [1956].

SS: During that time did they—were blacks still takin' the standardized test? Stanford-Binet [Intelligence Scales]?

UT: Oh, no. They didn't start takin' that—that's the test for that (inaudible)?

SS: Mm-hm.

UT: No, they weren't takin' that then. That was (inaudible). I don't know what year they started it, but we later had to take it. That test later proved that—nothing, because the negroes got to a place where they could pass it. Then they finally had to switch to something, some other test, but they got to the place where—by teaching the test like (inaudible).

You see, that test wasn't new to the teachers. Because that test was the test that they had been using in the white colleges and universities where Negroes were barred, I guess for thirty-five and forty years. Negroes didn't go to those white schools. Only if they could go—only a few Negroes could go there, where those tests were. So the children in those universities were exposed to those tests years ago. This is the test they had for the children to take, to compete with the white for schoolin'. It wasn't a fair test because our children didn't read it—even the Negro teachers hadn't been exposed to it. Only those few who were able to go to the white colleges and universities were exposed to that test. And then after it appeared (inaudible) like any other test.

You see the children—we have some smart children. Don't get that out of your head, that they're not smart. Maybe you got some smart children, you don't know how, why—but they're smart and they'll pass your test anywhere, in anybody's school, but it's such a few who will have that exposure. The test that they give today—some Negro children can pass it just as easily as some white, but they're so few. And the Negroes haven't been exposed to it, so they have to—this is what they're arguin' about now. They have to get these children qualified, they've got to expose, they got to give them more tests and more tests and more tests. So more of them can pass that test, expose them to it. The more you take it, the easier it becomes. Then they got some that don't have a bit (inaudible).

SS: So how do you feel about the literacy test they're taking now?

UB: The literacy test? Same thing. You got some from so far back in the woodlands that haven't been away to school. How do you expect a child to pass a literacy test who hasn't been exposed in the schools? You got some back out there so far in the woods that they haven't been to school. Then you got some right here in town, they'll eat it up, just like some of the rest of them. I'm not saying that they're not takin' advantage—some of them—but you got so few. So overall, the whole group has to suffer until we can get more of the group to do better with these tests, that's all. And nothing for anybody to get excited about. It takes time, all you gotta do is buckle down (inaudible) and think about the preliminary work (inaudible). They can pass it, they have the ability.

FB: Okay, before when we had to take (inaudible)—

UT: Before?

FB: Yeah, when we had to take the (inaudible), before then, right. Okay, what sort of tests were given to children? Let's say the elementary level, junior high, and if there were a test separate that (inaudible) exam. Was there one set aside especially for blacks and one for whites?

(UT and CT speak simultaneously)

UT: They were standardized by the state. The California test and all, they didn't have there (inaudible)

CT: The California (inaudible) our children couldn't compete because (inaudible)

UT: They didn't have any standardized test for the children, all children took the test. Do you understand? And I been tryin' to explain to you why you have this ratio of children doin' good on the test and the ratio of those doin' fair and those doin' nothin'. You have that ratio along the whites, but you have so many Negroes that are not doing well. Since we're talking about it, there are so many Negroes that are not doing well because they have—I don't see that they have the advantage, because they didn't take the exams as a child, for one reason or another.

CT: (inaudible)

UT: You see, way back then in slavery time when children had to have a mammy, who was the mammy? The Negro. So who watches her children while she was minding those other children? What was happenin' to her children, huh? Who minded them? They had to get it the best way they could—or didn't get it. You see what I mean? So that thing traces right on from slavery.

The same thing's happenin' right now. They aren't behind because of any fixed thing, it's because they—I mean, because of any set thing—it's many things that caused them to be behind. It's (inaudible) from childhood on up you'd had more Negro children gettin' along much better in school. But it's the poor Negro child (inaudible) studied problems and the mother and the dad out there workin'; they weren't slaves but they were almost slaves. But when they brought them here they were slaves, and you know how long that last.

And in some of the places, why, it's goin' on now. You'd be surprised to know how many Negroes actually have reared their children right in their jurisdiction. They got to get out of work and go and feed and so on and so on and so on, and all that type of thing and children and so on, and who is there takin' care of his children? That's goin' on today. It isn't broken in some parts of the country.

So that's what we fightin', that's what—we've got to go way back, and it takes time. Now, everybody wanna move (inaudible) they want you to move, they want you to do this, they want you to do that, so then your kids can't (inaudible) cause we haven't done what we could have done for our children because we had so much other stuff to do. Your children, you got to work, and if you got to work and you ain't got children, there be somebody in the house that gonna be responsible them gettin' and their bath and all that stuff. Don't you know the child gonna be retarded? He ain't gonna move as fast because he doesn't have that guidance, he doesn't have that help, he doesn't have that push. (inaudible)

Side 1 ends; side 2 begins.

FB: Blake and Middleton High Schools, the only other high school in Tampa (inaudible).

CT: And Lomax. They all had to send their child to Lomax, that was the place.

FB: So all of the black kids from around the area at the time had to—

CT: Had to come out here on the streetcar. They rode the streetcar out here.

UT: That's right, all over town.

CT: From everywhere it came. They would ride—even (inaudible), they would ride the streetcar to Lomax. There were lots more streetcars cause there weren't as many

automobiles then (inaudible) had to ride the streetcar (inaudible)

FB: What about Wimauma and—?

CT: Those would ride the (inaudible) the city is here and this is—well, the Plant City children would come to Tampa after—

UT: After eighth grade, ninth grade or eighth grade.

CT: Eighth grade. Because Ethel Eiser was my classmate; she came from Plant City. She finished Marshall, and she came here when she finished Marshall (inaudible). We taught together, but I retired (inaudible)

FB: This concentration of blacks from all different areas when this (inaudible) create private classrooms?

CT: Yeah, they had private classrooms then.

FB: Did any of the schools have double sessions?

CT: No, we didn't know anything about double sessions. No, they didn't have double sessions.

UT: You see, when you finish ninth grade, you don't have to go on to high school. How many between your classes did you have, do you remember?

CT: There were eight.

UT: See what I mean, eight students.

CT: There were children come out of Thonotosassa, and I imagine Plant City, too; they come into Tampa.

UT: You see what I mean? That was transportation (inaudible)

FB: In the city of Tampa alone, there was only eight in ninth grade?

UT: So that tell you how this thing was really cut down. You know? By the time they got to the senior class, there were eight.

CT: And that was in 1925.

UT: In 1925, eight in the senior class. I know at Don Thompson [school] in 1946, we didn't have all those credits. But we didn't have but three hundred (inaudible) nine through twelve.

CT: (inaudible)

FB: You had three hundred and somethin' from [grades] nine through twelve, and by the time they got to twelve you had less than twenty?

UT: That's right (inaudible)

SS: I know when they started Marshall, going through twelfth grade, they used to have about fifteen, sixteen graduate.

UT: That's what happened.

CT: There was five girls and three boys finished.

FB: Did the School Board attempt to commission (inaudible)?

UT: (inaudible)

CT: I don't think they had a school board then.

UT: I hate to say it, but where is this goin'?

CT: You still don't have that all, do you?

FB: Integration.

UT: I say, integration has been worse to (inaudible) today. If he expects to have a job, and believes in our (inaudible), it has awakened him to a new day (inaudible) and I say that by saying this. There was so much.

CT: —that he wasn't exposed to, not even the Negro teachers.

end of interview