

**Denson, Zera (Wayne Pate)**  
**7/7/2004 Interview by James McClurken.**  
**Muscogee Nation of Florida Technical Assistance Response 2012**

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[JMC] Interview with Zera Denson by James M. McClurken, 7 July 2004, JMC

[transcribed by kf]

Jim: Today is the evening of July 7, 2004, we're in the town of Bruce, Florida. I'm Jim McClurken, I'm with Heather Howard, and we're in the home of Zera Denson. And we're about to do another round of interviews with Zera. And we're gonna talk about the school at Bruce, we're gonna talk about her employment at this school, we're gonna talk about who went to this school, we're gonna talk about why they went to this school and you're comfortable with all of that, right?

Zera: Yes.

Jim: [Inaudible at 00:01:53]. [Laughing]. So when did you start teaching at Bruce School?

Zera: Well, I went to Bruce School.

Jim: Did you?

Zera: From grades 1 through 10.

Jim: And what year did you start?

Zera: Well, I was born in Pensacola, 1924, and we moved home back to Bruce that was our original home. We moved back here about twenty-nine ('29) or thirty ('30), I guess. 'Cause I was in the first grade, what we called the first grade. You had to be six years old to be in the first grade. Or gonna be six years old, I think, by October, so I was would have been six years old when I started, which would have been in 1930, I guess. So at that time it was a one room school, one teacher, so this could've been twenty-nine ('29). I don't know, but anyhow, a little tornado came by and blew off the roof and tore up part of the school and left the foundation. So then the, ah, School Board came in and they rebuilt the outside and made it into three rooms.

Jim: Mmm-hmm.

Zera: With a little kitchen. So, I remember my first year in the one room and I don't remember anymore after that. So, I'm assuming that the tornado came along there sometime and tore up the school partially and they rebuilt it and made it into three rooms instead of one big room. So, as I remember, I probably had three people in my class. I know I went through school with three people for a long time in my grade, my two cousins.

Jim: And who were they?

Zera: (b) (6) Ward and [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [Laughing]. They were all, ah, their parents were my Mama's first cousins. We were all Indians. And their grandparents were like my grandparents, brother or sister.

Jim: And who were they?

Zera: J.J. Ward was my grandfather.

Jim: Mmm-hmm.

Zera: And [REDACTED] grandmother was [REDACTED] Ward, which was grandpa's sister, and [REDACTED] uh, grandfather was [REDACTED] Ward, which was grandpa's brother. So, it was cousins.

Jim: Mmm-hmm.

Zera: So, as I remember, second grade was, I guess, first grade was when I got my two licks because one of my friends that I knew passed by the window and I waved hello and they switched me two licks for speaking from the classroom. I remember that very well.

Jim: Who was the teacher?

Zera: [REDACTED] [REDACTED] He was a big 'ol tall man, but it was a no-no to be distracted from your studies [laughing]. So, anyhow, I got my two licks. I had two spankin's during my school time and that was back when they used the paddlin' switches all the time. Now, my next paddlin' was I had to go to class in the church some. I don't know really why [laughing] unless that was when they was rebuilding the school, I don't know. All I know is I had some of my classes in the church. So, [REDACTED] [REDACTED] my cousin that I've been to school with all this time, he draws a picture. Well, he was always sort of my sweetheart, you know, we were sort of sweet on each other, but we really didn't pretend that we was, we didn't like each other is how we pretended. So he draws this picture, which was really pretty good, and wanted to show it to me and as we went out the door I said well that wasn't very pretty to me. So he popped me one [laughing] and I scratched him one and then I got my three licks and I didn't ever get anymore of those. I thought, well, I don't believe I better break the rules anymore. But anyhow, the school, I can't tell you how many people were there, it was small classes, but after we got three rooms we would have like first, second and third in a room, fourth, fifth and sixth in a room, and seventh and eighth in a room. We went through eight grades for quite some time and then later on they added a ninth and tenth 'cause we didn't have transportation. The high school, nearest high school was DeFuniak Springs, 30 miles.

Jim: Hmm.

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Zera: So, we had good teachers, though, they were smart. They could teach the ninth and tenth grade with no problems, you know, they were smart people. Although, as I remember, one of my teachers she'd always have us take the dictionary and look up vocabulary words and I'd always find it before she did [laughing] and I was sittin' there waitin' for her and she'd look at me.

Jim: [Chuckling].

Zera: But anyhow, uh, we had good teachers in school. They did use the paddle, you know, the men, men teachers in particular and we had a lot of sort of mean mischievous with boys. And, then I went through the tenth grade and then they bussed us. They sent a little bus and took us to DeFuniak and we'd go to Freeport and catch a bigger bus. So, we were able to graduate from high school.

Jim: Hmm. And how many of the people that you went to school with still live in the area?

Zera: Still live in the area?

Jim: Yeah.

Zera: Well, these three live in ten miles of me, the two men have died now.

Jim: Uh-huh.

Zera: But they always lived in the area.

Jim: I see.

Zera: Um, Keith lived right across from the Dead River Cemetery.

Jim: Uh-huh.

Zera: Stanley lived, right after he married, they lived at what we called Cumbie Head where uncle Tom Ward lived. Uncle Tom had a big house, that's about two miles up the road. A big house. And then he built a little house over here for (b) (6) his son. Behind the big field he built Warren a house, and up on this hill he built [REDACTED] a house. That was three of his children. So, they lived right behind him.

Jim: Hmm.

Zera: Warren carried the mail, I don't know what cousin [REDACTED] did, and [REDACTED] but they had jobs and they farmed, too, for Uncle Tom. So, [REDACTED] lived there all his life until he got grown and married and he went in the Navy. Both of the boys went in the Navy during

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World War II. And when they came back then they married two girls from Red Bay and one of them was just a cousin (b) (6) She was and Indian, too, Black-eyed Joe's granddaughter.

Jim: And what was her name?

Zera: [REDACTED]

Jim: [REDACTED]

Zera: [REDACTED] [REDACTED] And he married her and they moved across from the cemetery, right up here.

Jim: Dead River?

Zera: Dead River Cemetery, uh-huh. And they lived there until the children got grown and then they moved to Red Bay where her father lived. And he was married to Black-eyed Joe's daughter.

Jim: And Black-eyed Joe is J.J. Ward's?

Zera: John Green. John Green's . . .

Jim: That's Diamond Joe's brother?

Zera: Mmm-hmm. His son.

Jim: Okay.

Zera: So, it was all . . . kinfolks.

Jim: His son?

Zera: And as I say, [REDACTED] married a distant cousin.

Jim: Mmm-hmm.

Zera: Which was not too uncommon.

Jim: Yeah.

Zera: Now [REDACTED] married just a lady from Red Bay. And he's somebody you might want to talk to.

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Jim: Yeah.

Zera: He's still alive.

Jim: And how many of the kids who went to the school when you were there were Indian kids?

Zera: Well, all my family. Uncle Mano's children, um, well most of them. Half of them at least, I'd say.

Jim: Were there other families besides yours there?

Zera: Yeah, there's the (b) (6) and the [REDACTED] um, the [REDACTED]

Jim: That's a name I've never heard before.

Zera: [REDACTED] Well, the [REDACTED] person, his mother was [REDACTED] [REDACTED] and she married my uncle [REDACTED] my great uncle [REDACTED] grandpa's brother.

Jim: Uh-huh.

Zera: And she had this one son when she married him named [REDACTED] [REDACTED] which, of course, she became [REDACTED] Ward but, he kept his name from his father and I don't know who that was. And then after she met uncle [REDACTED] uncle [REDACTED] was sorta' poor compared to us poor, poor, you know we were poor but they, you know, he farmed a little bit and did a few things but he didn't ever have much or anything. So, [REDACTED] sister was married to [REDACTED] [REDACTED]

Jim: Mmm-hmm.

Zera: And, they had a big farm and about some of everything, so [REDACTED] lived with his aunt Annabelle and uncle John Miller. They're both buried up at Dead River. And then, he married [REDACTED] uh, [REDACTED] [REDACTED] sister, [REDACTED] [REDACTED] . . .

Jim: Hmm-mmm.

Zera: . . .who is a [REDACTED] now and she still lives up at the [REDACTED] place.

Jim: Huh.

Zera: But, we had, as far as I know that's the only [REDACTED] we had and that was because it was a step-child I guess you would say to the Ward's.

Jim: Did people, did the kids back then know that they were Indians?

Zera: Did we know we were Indians? Well, back then we didn't talk about being Indians, you know, it just wasn't ever mentioned. We's just all . . . race was never mentioned, did I ever remember race being mentioned in school. I have no recollection of race being mentioned in school.

Jim: Mmm-hmm. Was it ever mentioned at home?

Zera: Occasionally [chuckles]. Uh, it wasn't [chuckling] in style to be an Indian, we just didn't talk Indian.

Jim: Uh-huh.

Zera: I never knew of anybody in public talkin' about us being, you know, grandpa running for County Commissioner, running for School Board Member. It wasn't ever 'I'm an Indian running for School Board Member', you know, or 'I'm and Indian running', he was just the leader at Bruce. A business man and he would run on his credentials, you know.

Jim: Mmm-hmm.

Zera: I help people. I'm successful in business. I could help run a school system. I can help run a County Commissioner business and he was elected many years to do that. In fact, the only time he got beat when he quit runnin' was the fella runnin' against him went up in the north end of the county and told he had died. Now that's the truth. He went up and told all the voters that J.J. had died and that this fella that was runnin' would really be a good County Commissioner and they needed to vote for him. And they voted for him because grandpa was supposedly dead. Now we found that out to be the truth. And it was in the paper. They just couldn't believe that J.J. Ward had such an upset at the election. I've got the paper, the write-up on it. He had always had no trouble being elected. And, see, suddenly he's not elected because you didn't vote for dead people, you know [chuckling]. So . . . .

Jim: When did you start teaching? Uh, well, tell me what was graduation from the school like?

Zera: Okay, graduation, 1942, at Walton High School I think there was probably eighty-something in our class.

Jim: Now, graduation from, from Bruce School.

Zera: From Bruce School? Well, I got an 'Excellent in Spelling' diploma in grade two and it seems like they gave us a little diploma for grade eight, if you made it that far.

Jim: Did you have a ceremony?

Zera: No we didn't have a ceremony. We were just presented certificates. But back in those days the school Superintendent always visited the school. And I remember well he always had a question for you, too, when he'd come to the school. He'd want to know that you could spell a word, or he'd pick a hard word and pick you out to spell, or 'What's the capital of Iowa?' You know, just come out with some question, but he would come in and actually quiz us and I thought after I got grown and got in the school system I thought well that was interesting thing that the school Superintendent would come and visit a little school and talk to the kids to see what you're learning. And sometimes we'd write for him on the blackboard. We had a blackboard. So, we always knew who the Superintendent was by name 'cause he'd drive to Bruce. I can remember that for years.

Jim: Hmm.

Zera: So, then when we finished the tenth grade we went to high school. Of course, you know, we were the little country people in the high school. Now this is the interesting thing to me. I was never bothered about being from Bruce and going to Walton High School. But, I had classmates that were from up in the farming area north of DeFuniak and they stayed angry with those people all their lives. One of them wouldn't even come to our class reunions because of the way we were treated at Walton High School, and I didn't know I was treated any differently. I always remember we had what we called a 'home room' and we'd have spelling in home room about fifteen minutes, and then about once a month then they'd pick a person from each home room to be on the stage to be in the spelling match. And I got picked every time, I usually sat down on the first word. I finally asked 'em why I was being picked [laughing]. I don't know what had happened, they'd just give me a word I couldn't spell when I got up there, but we'd have a little spelling match from all the home rooms in your grade level, which were quite a few. But, uh, I've never felt like anybody mistreated me because I was from Bruce. In fact, I graduated eighth in my class, you know, which I thought was pretty good considering I didn't even know what eighth in the class was. But, somebody came up and whispered to me, "Did you know you're number eight in the graduation class?" And I thought, 'What's that?' [Laughing]. You know, I've been in a class of three people [laughing], I was worried about being eighth in a graduating class? But, I remember another thing that maybe this would have been a little looking down on, you know, I remember when I took Algebra I in my senior year. I don't think I picked my classes. I think they picked them for me because they put me in Business Math instead of Algebra II and I didn't quite understand that 'cause we had what we called a Study Hall and I always helped the kids that went on to Algebra II with Algebra II even though I wasn't in the class. But, I could do that. But, I guess they thought I wouldn't need Algebra II, I don't know. And I really didn't and I still don't need Algebra II [laughing]. I don't know what I needed Algebra II for. But, anyhow, I never felt discriminated against, and I had friends there, and I went to



the Senior Prom, and, you know, to graduation exercises. I felt . . . and I still do, you know . . . I was just on a Committee meeting with people from Freeport that were complaining because of the way the people from DeFuniak treat them, and across the Bay they treat them. And I thought, 'How do they treat us?', you know. I don't feel mistreated and never did and I don't think anybody in Bruce ever felt mistreated. I remember when we went to sing up in the country, my mother and I, and Tom Beasley was our town lawyer, but he was also a singer. So, he gets up and says, "We will now have the welcome and prayer by Malzie Pate." Mom and me had never seen that place before [laughing]. But she gets right up, prays and welcomes everybody and has her seat. We were always treated with respect, you know. I never had a problem with that.

Jim: When you were a kid, what did you do at school for recreation?

Zera: Well, now we had some real good programs for children in school. We went out and made us up some games. We jumped the rope, if you know what that is. Two people holds the rope and turns it, and you jump. We played jump rope, we played softball, we had, I believe we did have a bat. I'm not sure we always had a bat, we might of had a board, I don't know. But, we'd have a little 'ol sponge ball. That was the only kind of ball we had, we didn't have a real ball. And then, when I was about in the seventh grade, we had a dirt basketball court. And we had a guy that came out to be our principal and he was a basketball coach, so he got us some goal posts and everyone of us girls, uh, were on the basketball team and we won the County tournament playing on that dirt basketball court out here. But, the tournament was in DeFuniak Springs in the Chautauqua Building. But, we played basketball, we played softball, it wasn't a real softball.

Jim: Mmm-hmm.

Zera: We played jump rope. We just thought up things. And we had, you know, where the little school is, the big pine trees all around it? It used to be more pine trees, but that was all cleared out and we were allowed to go sit under the trees and visit. So, we had fun.

Jim: Did you have Christmas programs?

Zera: Oh, we had a Christmas program every year at the school and the church.

Jim: And what was the one at the school like?

Zera: Well, the school was like, we'd be given little parts to learn and somebody would announce you and you'd get up and bow and say your little part and bow and sit down and everybody would clap. And, then one time when, I guess this was in the real Depression, I must've been about the fourth grade, it got so bad in Walton County 'til they actually hired a music teacher and a dance/art teacher, a piano and guitars, and they would come to Bruce to the school, to us and teach us a lesson. I think I took two lessons

from the piano teacher. But, I was in a big play and, uh, the guy taught us how to do a little tap dance and, and he brought all his make-up and, oh, he made me up. I was a princess, or something, because I remember my cousin came up and says, "Why you are just beautiful." And I thought, 'Yeah, I sure am.' [Laughing]. But I was all made up with all this lipstick and rouge and stuff, you know, but we didn't have that but a year or two. But, my brother took guitar lessons and they were really trained people, you know, good musicians. And they were workin' just like everybody else. That was a job for them. But, they went all through the county to the little schools. And another thing we had was a Bible teacher. Uh, what did we call him? We had a name for him, but I can't think of what it was. I don't know what he called himself, but he would come in, we'd all gather in one room and he had his little board, his little flannel board, and he'd tell a Bible story and put his little figures up on the board and he'd go through the story in the Bible. Then we'd sing a song and he'd pray and that was our little teachin' from the Bible. So, we had a little bit of entertainment. Sometimes we had an little man that would come and show a movie, Mr. Hattaway. He had a little 'ol dinky truck sort of a built on truck with his projector and films, and he'd come at night. But, he'd have to come to the school to see if we'd let him come to the school to show the movie. And then he'd charge the people that came a little fee, I forgot, a dime or something. And he'd get his old [gesturing] 'Rrr, Rrr, Rrr' projector going, you know, I was ready for t.v. . . . just as you'd get to a crucial point in the movie, he'd just cut it off! "I'm gonna sell popcorn!" And we were thinkin' 'You don't cut a movie off in the middle,' you know. Sometimes he'd have snow cones and popcorn. But, we'd all quit and go have refreshments, come back and get seated, he'd hook it up again. And so when t.v. came on and right in the middle of everything they'd put a commercial then I said, "Oh, I've been through that with Mr. Hattaway." [Laughing]. Everybody wasn't introduced to commercials that early.

Jim: So, did everyone in the community go to the movies?

Zera: Oh, yeah. The parents would come bring us. And, it was a big event. He'd come about once a month.

Jim: And this was during the Depression?

Zera: Yeah.

Jim: So, thirty-two ('32), thirty-three ('33)?

Zera: [Nodding affirmatively]. And, I remember one time he got a big crowd 'cause he said he was gonna show the big boxing match and he told who it was. Joe Louis, I think. Well, everybody went. But, what do you think he had? The first one he'd ever won [laughing]. We thought we were gonna see the new one. Boy, he got him a big crowd. We went up there and that thing started and ended and I thought . . . [laughing].

Jim: What room did you show them in?

Zera: In the Council House room.

Jim: In the room where your desk is?

Zera: [Nodding affirmatively]. Where we have our Council meeting. Now that was our biggest room.

Jim: Ah. That was your biggest room?

Zera: And we put other chairs so people could sit there.

Jim: Heather will do an interview with you at the school tomorrow and you can point out where stuff happened.

Zera: Okay, well this was in the biggest room in the school. And, another thing we had at the school, we had the political speakins'.

Jim: Mmm-hmm.

Zera: We either had them in the church, if it was raining we had them at the church. And grandpa was the Democratic party chairman in this county for many years. So, the first one was always at Bruce. So, all the women would cook food and take out to the school, and we'd serve a plate to the candidates and anybody else who wanted to eat for a dollar. And that way the Women's Club would make a little money, you know, that way. So we'd have the political speakins' there, too. And then the way they'd speak if we were outside they'd stand on the porch and yell. They didn't have a microphone. Everybody would stand out in the yard, tell who they were, what they were runnin' for, vote for me, you know.

Jim: How many people would be standing out in that yard?

Zera: Just about everybody in Bruce.

Jim: And there'd be two or three hundred people?

Zera: Two or three hundred. Yeah, we'd all go. 'Cause this was only . . . you know, back then you didn't know anybody, and you didn't have a newspaper, and you didn't go anywhere. You had to go listen to 'em so you'd know who to vote for. Course they'd come around before that time and try to go to every house, give you a little card, and tell you to vote for 'em, you know. And some of the poor ones, they'd give them a little money 'cause I remember one of my friends saying, "Well he gave me two dollars to vote for him, so I

could buy me a new permanent.” You could get a permanent for two dollars. But, she said, “I didn’t vote for him.” [Laughing]. And I thought that was funny, I thought, ‘Well I don’t believe I would’ve told that.’ But, anyhow, that was another activity we had. And we had Halloween carnivals at the school.

Jim: And what would happen at a Halloween carnival?

Zera: Well, that’s where we’d have one room with all of the ghosts and, you know, it wasn’t ghosts and decorations like you see in the stores. It was something we made. We’d make our own people, our own ghosts, our own casket, put somebody in it. Sometimes we had a live somebody in it. One time we had a live one that jumped up and scared them nearly to death, uh, we thought if we got a box made and had a man lie down in it, and when they came in he could sit up. That was sorta’ dangerous I thought ‘cause it’s . . . you should’ve heard the screamin’. And, of course, you didn’t have electric lights, you know, um, it was like lamps and lanterns. It was scary enough already and dark, you know, and we got electric lights when we had the projector. We finally got current in the forties, mid- forties, I guess. Um, but, the Halloween carnival we’d have put a curtain up, a curtain meaning bed sheets on a wire, clothesline wire, and we’d get a little stick and put a line on it, a clothespin and you’d throw it over the curtain and somebody behind the curtain would clip a prize on the clothespin and you’d catch a fish. And that was a fish pond. And you can imagine what kind of presents you got. Nickle ones. We had a cake walk. In the middle of the big room, we’d draw a big circles, like two lines, and number one, two, three as we could go, you’d pay a dime, everybody would get on your number, then either play music, or we’d sing or somebody would clap. We’d do something, make noise and then they’d say, “Stop.” They’d draw a number and whoever was on that number got the cake. And that was called the cake walk.

Jim: Who provided the cakes?

Zera: We all brought cakes from the homes to donate them. All the different households would take a cake.

Jim: And at that time Bruce was about half Indian?

Zera: Yeah, I’d say so.

Jim: Yeah.

Zera: Half Indian and the other half was somebody married an Indian, most of them.

Jim: Yeah? So you could say that almost every family in the community at that point was pretty much Indian or had kids you’d count as Indian?

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Zera: Yeah, uh, you see the ones that'd never been proven that lived down on the river, you know, the (b) (6) and the they were, in my opinion, they were Indians but, you know, we weren't even trying to find out who was an Indian back then. But, they were participants in everything we did, you know.

Jim: Mmm-hmm.

Zera: They were just like the rest of us. But we had that activity and another thing was the box suppers. I think I might have told you about the box suppers where the girls that were big enough would take an old box, sometimes we'd get a shoe box usually, and get crepe paper and construction paper and cover it and put flowers on it and ribbons, gather up everything we could find. And then in it we would put a supper for two, like two pieces of chicken, two potato salads, two rolls or something, you know. And so a boy would buy the box not knowing who it belonged to so they could e, at supper with their girlfriend. But they usually didn't get their girlfriends box, unless they slipped and told them. One time, they had us stick our hand out. They bought it from the hand. I remembered that I thought, 'Who out there knows what anybody's hand looks like?' You know, can you imagine suddenly somebody sayin' to you, 'We're gonna put our hand out, now which one's your girlfriend?' I don't know how they did that, but anyhow, it was fun 'cause I don't think anybody got the right hand.

Jim: Now this was at the school that you did that?

Zera: This was at the school.

Jim: In the back room?

Zera: All these things . . . and I remembered they took us to the door and you'd just stick your hand out the door and they had the men out in the yard, the boys out in the yard, and they'd see your hand stick out. And somebody would bid on that hand. Two dollars. One dollar. Fifty cents. That's all they ever had.

Jim: [Chuckling].

Zera: So, we weren't worth much. But, they didn't have much money, you know. Now as far as I know other than our fish fries that was about the main thing we had.

Jim: And the fish fries?

Zera: Oh, grandpa always had fish camps. He had Smokehouse Lake, he had the Wise Bluff, he had the Rooks Bluff. He had one of those major fish camps always, and he had boats you rented, that's a little old wooden boat. We called it a 'skiff', I don't know what you all called it. And I think he charged a dollar to rent the boat all day. And he'd keep them

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... tied up at the bank of the river and he didn't run the camp, he'd have somebody, hire somebody. I know the (b) (6) used to run it, the [REDACTED] would run it for us. They'd be in charge of the camp. They'd collect the rent. But we'd go fishing anytime we wanted to, and use the boats. And then, when we caught the fish, we'd come in and they had a little cookout place. We'd scale the fish, cook the fish, and eat that night. And that was our big fish fry. And I remember one time when our drunken friend came, and, uh, we had kind of a lot of fish so he kept wantin' a fish. Well, aunt Mazie gave him a fish a time or two, so directly she thought, 'Well he's gonna eat up all the fish before we have supper', so she started given him a hush-puppy, which is cornbread, you know. He says, "Well," then she gave him another hush-puppy and he said, he bit off one and he says, "I can't tell is this fish or if this hush-puppy is the best and he was bitin' off of two hush-puppies. Well, he was sort of in his spirits, you know, he didn't really know what he was even eatin'. But, anyhow, we used to have our lawyer friend, Tom Beasley, he used to come down and eat with us. Grandpa always had important people to come to see him. 'Cause he had a lot of pull and, you know, if he was running for something and needed help he was the one who could do it. So we had a good life. We walked to the river, we walked, if I walked three miles I'd look better. Walk three miles? We didn't think about walkin' three miles.

Jim: Yeah.

Zera: Stanley, my cousin and other cousins that lived up to Cumbie Head, that's about two miles. We walked that regular. The [REDACTED] lived about a mile up the road. We'd just walk up there anytime. And now I can't make it to the church. [Laughing]. You know? Walkin' went out of style just when it should've been in style.

Jim: Well, it's coming back.

Zera: But, anyhow, that was going to school. And then, you want me to start teaching?

Jim: Yeah.

Zera: Okay. Well, I graduated in forty-two ('42) and at that time all of the men, just about, were, that were able-bodied, were going into the service. You know, they had the draft.

Jim: Mmm-hmm.

Zera: Well, Lamar Ward was my cousin from Freeport, who was our principal. So, he needed substitutes a lot of the time 'cause he had other teachers helpin' him, you know, and so he started asking me to go substitute. So I would. And, so then, in I think forty-four ('44) he ask 'em to just let me start teaching. But, in the meantime, they had asked a bunch of my graduating class, the ones that was sort of at the top of the class, you know, to go take an Emergency Teacher's Exam. Well, you oughta try takin' that right out of high school.

I still get tickled when I think of that test. Uh, we'd go up and I'd look around and see some of my classmates up there, you know, and I'd look at these questions, I don't know the answers to three of them. They'd say, "Do you know the answer to number . . ." And I'd say, "No!" I don't think any of us passed the test [laughing], but they hired us anyhow. 'Cause, they just gave us what they called 'Emergency Certificates.' You could teach one year and then, if they couldn't get anybody, they'd give you one the next year. So I just kept teaching 'cause. . . meantime though, um, my supervisor, she was rather impressed with my teaching skills since I didn't know how. And, so she asked me would I start to college and I said, "Well." Grandpa had asked me that and I said, "Now Grandpa, I'm not even old enough to teach school." If I had a certificate, you know. You'd have to be, I think it was twenty-one, and I hadn't got twenty-one. But, anyhow, I wasn't interested in anything. But Mrs. (b) [REDACTED] that's Bob Graham's aunt. You know, Bob Graham was our Senator. She was a rather well known person, but she asked me would I start to college, you know, and go 'cause if you made six hours you could renew your certificate. So, then she comes up and she says, "And I can get you a little scholarship." And I thought, 'What's that?' You know, living in Bruce I wasn't too familiar with a scholarship. Well, it was ninety dollars. That was a heap of money. But, anyhow, they gave it to me and I went started at FSU. So, I just started going every summer, and went the rest of my life. I went until I got my Bachelor's degree, and I then went until I got my Master's degree, and then I didn't go anymore. But, anyhow, I taught at Bruce and I remember the first time we didn't have a principal. It got to me to be the principal, you know. And here I am trying to teach without knowing how to teach and then I'm gonna be the principal. And I always remember the first day as a principal, 'cause don't think the parents didn't bring the kids to school the first day because they wanted to meet the teacher and see what you were going to do. So, I look around at them and I was probably twenty years old then and I think, 'Okay. Here I am!' I get up and, "Well, good morning! Welcome to Bruce School," you know. And "We'll now, uh, pledge allegiance to the flag," I said. And then I read a little scripture and said, "We'll say the Lord's Prayer." And I thought, 'Lord help me. I don't know what I'm doing, but I must be doing something.'

Jim: [Laughing].

Zera: Well, then we registered the children. They had to tell their name, and birthday, and parents name. We had to write all that down each year in what we called the teacher's register, a little yellow book. So, I got through that and they seemed to like me, so I just stayed with teaching. Now, that was really an experience, you know. I thought, 'What am I gonna do, you know, in front of all these people and be a principal?'

Jim: Do you still have any of the teacher's registers?

Zera: They didn't let us keep 'em.

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Jim: No?

Zera: But, that's what the school system's got. And you see those pages that, when towards the latter years?

Jim: Mmm-hmm.

Zera: Where there's a lot of names on the page and some other names? There was two pages. You wrote their name, age, birthday, parents, and then you kept their attendance all the way across that. And every month, then you had to make a report. And you had to turn in how many came to school, how many days they missed. They had a little form you filled out. It wasn't easy to fill out, either, and, but you had to turn that in every month to show you had been to school and who had come and that sort of thing, and it was called a teacher's register.

Jim: So, who were the students?

Zera: Well, I taught both of my brothers, (b) (6) and [REDACTED] out at Bruce School. Um, the café lady [REDACTED] [REDACTED] she went to the Bruce School. Her sister [REDACTED] [REDACTED] I taught her younger sister. I think [REDACTED] [REDACTED] was in a higher grade.

Jim: Hmm.

Zera: I taught [REDACTED] [REDACTED] I taught the [REDACTED] and the [REDACTED] the [REDACTED] 'Course, it was their children later because [REDACTED] was in the grade with my brother. So, then when he married and had children I believe they probably were old enough that they went on to Freeport 'cause I moved over to Freeport then. And then I had these same kids from Bruce, too, though.

Jim: So, how long did you teach at Bruce?

Zera: I think, probably six years. Six or seven years, somewhere around there.

Jim: So, it closed in fifty-two ('52)?

Zera: Well, it closed in fifty-four ('54) because [REDACTED] [REDACTED] came in and kept it open two more years. He had to bring the car pool from Red Bay and Ponce de Leon to have enough to teach. But, when I thought the school was gonna' close the principal at Freeport asked me would I take a job there. And we didn't really have enough to keep the school open and I said yes and I just changed over to Freeport. And then, some of the few left in Bruce, they wanted their kids to stay in Bruce, you know, so Mr. [REDACTED] he lived up towards Ponce de Leon so he just brought some of his students he'd always taught up there. He brought some of them with him to Bruce. They'd let you do that back then.



Jim: Hmm.

Zera: 'Cause I noticed on his register he had some in Red Bay and Ponce de Leon, some kids he taught. But that would make enough for him to keep the school. I remember he came to see me one day. He said, "Miss Zera, how did you get a broom to sweep the floor?" I said, "I asked for one." Now you know you had no janitorial service and a lot of the kids came to school bare footed. Well, you bring sand in the school you had to sweep that school every day by hand with a broom, you know, a straw broom, just a regular broom like we use today only it wasn't plastic. Well, it was the dustiest thing in the world, so we'd get a can of water and we'd walk and we'd sprinkle the water on the floor and then we would sweep it and then the dust wouldn't get all over everything.

Jim: Hmm.

Zera: But, anyhow, you had to sweep the floor and we'd always assign the kids to help do that, you know, pick three maybe, and have three kids that would come in and sweep, and then the next day three more would come in and sweep. And we had to build our own fire in the little wood heater. Now they did buy us wood to take out there, but we had to get the kids to bring the wood in and I'd always save the little scrap paper after they'd throw away paper. I'd always save that to build the fire the next morning, put that in the heater, lay the wood on the paper, light the paper, then the fire would start. And I had one little boy, the one who fixed the little tombstone I told you about . . .

Jim: (b) (6)

Zera: [REDACTED]

Jim: [REDACTED]

Zera: I asked him one day would he build the fire. And he said, "Well, why should I build the fire?" I was so surprised, you know. And I thought, 'Now why would anybody say that,' you know. And I said, "Well because you're gonna keep warm by it, Romie, just like I am, so get up and build the fire." So, he did. But, would you think a kid would not want to help build the fire if it's his school and him tryin' to keep warm, too? I don't know, you know, they think I guess it was something to resent doing thinking I was mistreatin' him 'cause I wanted him to build a fire. But, anyhow, the kids, I don't know how many, we can count on the roll sorta' how many were out here. The only time we had, uh, too many kids out here was when the Freeport School burned and it was a rather large school for a country school and there was nowhere for those children to go, so they bussed some to Point Washington, some to Bruce, and some to DeFuniak.

Jim: Uh-huh.

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Zera: So, I got about probably ten. I was teachin' fourth and fifth grade. I remember well, 'cause I'd never had as meaner kids. I didn't have any mean kids when I taught school. Now when I went to school we had one family of the meanest kids you've ever seen. Conrad Laird was our principal and he got in a wreck and broke his leg and was on a crutch. And we had a boy at the school named (b) (6) [REDACTED]. We called him Slick 'cause he could steal so fast. Uh, he'd go in our little store and if you didn't watch out he'd steal him a drink and you couldn't even see him get it. Daddy'd get to where he'd go sit on the drink box probably 'cause Slick was in the store. Well, anyhow, he went up one day and stole Mr. Laird's pen. He didn't even see him get it and so, he says, "Slick, bring my fountain pen back." Oh, he didn't have it, you know, but of course he had it and he got it back. So, it got so bad with what Slick would do, he'd say every morning when we'd get to school, he'd say, "Slick, just come up here and let me whip you now before we even start." [Laughing]. He got a whippin' every day. And he had a little paddle, "Whoop, whoop," you know. But, it didn't do any good. And one day, he used to come help my daddy milk the cows, and daddy'd give him some milk. So, he came late one day and he said, "Mr. Ed, I slept on myself." Whatever that meant. But, anyhow, the Bruce School was a good little school and it was full of Indians, with no race mentioned. [Chuckling]. We never had any blacks in Bruce. Uh, it was always sort of strange to me. They had blacks everywhere, communities surrounding Bruce. But grandpa owned most of Bruce and what he didn't own his nephews, or cousins, or brothers owned and they, the Wards, owned nearly all of Bruce. And there were black people livin' in Red Bay, an there was black people livin' in Ebro, black people lived at Black Creek, black people lived at Freeport, black people didn't live in Bruce and I didn't ever understand that. Uh, I don't know who didn't let 'em live here. But it seemed like, I think Miss Idelle might have alluded to this, that grandpa sort of decided who lived in Bruce. Sort of what it seemed like. Now before I was here, back when my Mama first married, and they had the turpentine business in Bruce, they brought the black people in to work the turpentine things. But they had, they called them, daddy said, the 'quarters. They were way out towards Antioch Cemetery and they had a little settlement out there. They put up little houses for 'em to live in.

Jim: Hmm.

Zera: And they would go out to the pine trees and get the turpentine, dip the cups, you know, that sort of things like they did. You know what I'm talkin' about. But, they didn't live here and one time my . . . one of grandpa's nephews had the farm about two miles from here and he asked grandpa could he move a black man and woman in to farm for him and he let him, but they didn't have any part in the community and I didn't even know who they were. But, it was like, all my cousins in Red Bay, see, they had people that did their washin', cleaned their house, cooked, and we didn't have any help. We didn't have any black people, you know, we did our own cookin', and washin, and ironin', and cleanin' house. We did our own, we didn't have black help. And grandpa didn't ever have black help. His mamma said, when her parents divorced that grandpa always would have some

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woman that would come and live with him, a white woman, and cook and take care of her and aunt Mazie and uncle Mano. But, it was always white people. Which, white people were Indians, you know . . .

Jim: Mmm-hmm.

Zera: . . . but we called 'em white. 'Cause it was our own people usually . . .

Jim: Mmm-hmm.

Zera: . . . cousins and different people. And we had several cousins that parents died or I know there's probably at least three men that I know of (b) (6) and Ward. It was, they didn't have a home and they'd go live with an uncle awhile and then they'd go live with another family awhile. Just different families would take 'em in and let 'em just live there until they sort of wore out their welcome, and then they'd go stay with another one awhile. And a lot of times it would be the poorest family in Bruce that'd take 'em in and I always thought that was sort of interesting if you didn't have a dime how could you take on another person? But, they did. Aunt oh, she helped so many people. That was a uncle He was an Indian and she was my daddy's sister. But, they had those men that didn't have anywhere to go, they kept them for months at a time. But, grandpa had a little store and he didn't let Aunt starve to death. He'd give her something, you know, to eat. And, of course, my grandpa, we didn't ever get to the point where we didn't have anything to eat. We didn't ever know we were poor. Mama didn't ever tell us we were poor. And I never remember when we didn't have a meal, you know, 'cause we had chickens and hogs and milk cows, a garden, and then grandpa had the big farm where we shared with him stuff 'cause he had, I called him a tenant farmer. You'd get the and the . . .

Jim: Mmm-hmm.

Zera: . . . somebody would go and do the farmin'. It was back when they used a horse and a plow. But they'd plow the fields and raise corn, and peas, and beans, and that sort of stuff.

Jim: Where did live?

Zera: Where did what?

Jim: and Where did they live?

Zera: Well, you know where Travis Bishop road is right past the church?

Jim: Yeah.

Zera: Right at the end of that road.

Jim: Huh.

Zera: Uh, they first had a big house there. They had four children and I'm trying to get you to see the great-granddaughter, [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED] her daughter taught school some at Bruce. [REDACTED] [REDACTED] is one of the teachers, that was aunt [REDACTED]'s daughter.

Jim: Huh:

Zera: And they lived down that little dirt road and they lived right by the Black Creek.

Jim: Hmm.

Zera: And that's where, oh, and that was our big summer thing, was going to the Creek.

Heather: Hmm.

Zera: We had two Creeks. We had Seven Runs up at the cemetery. But you had to . . .

Jim: Up at Dead River?

Zera: . . . you had to ride up there, you know, but we could walk to this one. We lived out in the old, the old big house you went to see that time.

Jim: Mmm-hmm.

Zera: So, we would walk down the road through that swamp. And we had a little foot log. Somebody'd put a big tree, it took about three trees to cross the little creek. It was shallow but, you know, like knee deep, but if you weren't wantin' to wade and you couldn't see the snakes, or whatever. So we'd walk the foot log across that little creek. Sometimes we'd fall in, but we'd just get up and go on. And you could get to the creek that way. And aunt Jane lived right by the creek. So, [REDACTED] was her daughter. A little younger than me, but she was my girlfriend. And she always wanted to go swimming with us every time we went, which was everyday from May the 1st. We had to wait until May the 1st. Now that was the magic day that you could go to the creek, May the 1st. So, aunt Jane a lot of times would say, "Now [REDACTED] you can't go swimmin' today." So she'd just put on her bathing suit and start going. And she'd say, "Mama, I'm going." And she'd say, "No, you can't go." "Mama, I'm going." We're still walking down to the creek. "No, you can't go." So, just about the time we'd get out of hearing Aunt Jane would say, "Well, go on." So, that's what we used to say when the children wouldn't mind when we'd tell 'em to do something we'd say, "Well, go on." 'Cause if she was gonna go, she was gonna give her permission to go. And what'd we'd do, it had a

wooden bridge over it with runners. You know what a run . . . [gesturing] it was boards.

Jim: Mmm-hmm.

Zera: And then they put [gesturing] so you wouldn't fall through, I guess, but of course you tried to stay on that when you crossed the creek. So, we could jump off of that little bridge into the creek. And uncle (b) (6) who's aunt [redacted] husband, his big 'ol fat belly, he had a big ol' stomach, he took his bath down there in winter and summer. He'd go down there in the winter and float around there in that creek, his big 'ol stomach would stick up and he could just float a half a day in that creek.

Jim: Hmm.

Zera: And that bridge, you used to go to Antioch Cemetery that way. And the creek ran right by the little 'ol dirt road. Well, the road would get under water and wash away. So grandpa got somebody to cut little trees about [gesturing] that big and they laid them right side-by-side and they made a pole road. And there was a long way from that bridge to where the road got a little higher and dryer that it was a pole road. You could hardly walk on it bare footed 'cause you know, [gesturing], it'd hurt your feet.

Jim: So rough.

Zera: But, it was right by that little, ran right parallel to the creek., and it went over to the Antioch Cemetery. And then after somebody bought all that land, see, we had, uh, they called it the mud field, my daddy lived there a while. It's on the way to Antioch Cemetery if you go this way [gesturing] instead of. . .

Jim: The other way.

Zera: . . .down 20. See they just put that road in. . .

Jim: Ahh.

Zera: . . . not too long back because somebody bought all that land they fenced all that and you can't go in there and see any of it. But grandpa had the pole road built and then you could drive the pole road. And then way out there close to Antioch Cemetery is where my grandma lived some.

Jim: Which grandma?

Zera: And Mama lived there when she first got married.

Jim: Which grandmother?

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Zera: Mama's Mama. (b) (6) [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [(b) (6) 00:52:35] [laughing]. She had a few husbands. But, when she was married to grandpa Mac she lived, and I finally caught up to his bootleggin'. I guess that's why she moved out there. We didn't, I didn't ever know why she lived out there. But they used to come to Bruce in a wagon and a horse. And if I went home with them I rode in the horse and wagon. That's the only horse and wagon I'd ever ride in was with them going back to the farm out on Antioch. And it was a big old house with a lot of big oak trees and a little creek went right down below it. And there somewhere is where they had that big creek battle.

Jim: Hmm.

Zera: They're trying to put a marker up somewhere, but I don't know how they're going to put it 'cause it's all fenced now. But, when they had the turpentine business going on there were several houses out there, none now, but several then. Mama said she lived out there with daddy when they first married. And then her friend, [REDACTED] [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] who is Mrs. [REDACTED] daughter on our church roll, they lived out there awhile. And two families moved in, strangers that we didn't know, to try to farm. But that's what we called the sand hills. And nothing will hardly grow out there. Now, blueberries would grow. And we called it black-jack oaks. They tried to find something they could do with black-jacks, but they never could find out anything they could do with black-jacks.

Jim: Mmm-hmm.

Zera: But, cousin [REDACTED] lived back there, [REDACTED] Ward. That's [REDACTED] daddy. He's on the church roll. And his little boy drowned there. And Mama, said he was the first one buried in Antioch. Now, I don't know that, but that's what they always told me, that that's how they started that cemetery. And a guy I talked to the other day is a disabled veteran, but he's sorta' got a photographic memory. And he walks everywhere plottin' stuff. 'Course he's sort of crazy, but I think what he tells ya is the truth 'cause he reads it or hunts it up. But he says he's walked all of that and he said before Antioch there was a black cemetery out there, I guess, back when the blacks were out there.

Jim: Hmm.

Zera: But, he said it's disappeared. He said it was back past those big oaks where grandma lived. That cemetery we used, and then where the pretty good road is now, that goes to Antioch, it used to be like two lanes. They finally got to where you couldn't even go to the pole road. So then they had that road and when my grandpa died, grandpa Pate, there's a little creek there and we all bogged down going to the funeral and had to get out and push. And, so, that's when Mama told grandma, her mother, "Now, I want us to start being buried at Dead River so we don't bog down going to the funeral." So grandma said, "Well, if you promise to be buried at my feet I'll let you put me up there. But, no slab. I wanna be sure I can come out of that grave." [Chuckling]. So, all these years we'd

go make up that dirt grave and put these shells on it until it got to where we couldn't get any shells. And then Mama she finally got so old she couldn't do that. So, she told uncle (b) (6) who was the youngest one, "Now you have to be responsible for Mama's grave I cannot take care of it anymore." He went and bought her a granite slab and put it up there. So she's under that slab, but I think she'll come out on Resurrection Day. [Chuckling]. But that was her reason, that she said she wanted to be sure she could get out of that grave. She was Indian, too.

Jim: Hmm. Which one was?

Zera: Grandma [REDACTED] She was [REDACTED] [REDACTED] daughter and [REDACTED] [REDACTED] Ward. See, her and grandpa were cousins and they married. And she's also [REDACTED] [REDACTED] sister. [REDACTED] [REDACTED] that's on the church roll.

Jim: Hmm.

Zera: That's her brother. They're brother and sister.

Jim: So, people came from three, four and five miles around to go to that church?

Zera: Yeah, and they walked. Now cousin [REDACTED] she was nearly rich. She had an umbrella. When it rained or when it was real hot she was the only person I knew that lived off from here that had an umbrella, and she talked so proper. She was a [REDACTED] And she would come and she would say, "Good morning cousin Malzie. How are you today?" And, of course, she'd have snuff in her lip, her hair balled up, and have that little umbrella over head. We always got a good laughing when cousin Mollie would come. And she had for daughters and they was pretty as movie stars. The wildest women in Bruce. They all married, moved off, they'd come home on summer vacation and all the men available would take 'em out and party the whole time they were here. So, finally, Annie Laura, her husband decided to come down and see how she was doin'. And she was out at one of her parties, so that was her last trip to Bruce.

Jim: This was [REDACTED] [REDACTED]

Zera: No, this was [REDACTED] [REDACTED] Ward.

Jim: [REDACTED] [REDACTED] Ward.

Zera: Uh, that was her last trip. He didn't let her come back anymore when he found out what went on when they actually came. But there wasn't those women that did that, but they were so pretty. I remember all of 'em. They were as pretty as anybody you could see. And just as pleasant and kind and nice, and just as sorry. They'd just go out with anybody and do anything, from gettin' drunk to spendin' the night with them. And that

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was back in the days when women didn't do that.

Jim: This was in the thirties ('30's)?

Zera: Uh-huh. And cousin (b) (6) a big church worker and I don't know if she couldn't do anything about it or didn't care. I never did know which it was. But, anyhow, she had two sons. One of 'em got killed, he was mean. And the other one was [REDACTED] [REDACTED] and he was the town drunk and he married [REDACTED] [REDACTED] and they had one daughter. That was his second wife. But, then, he married [REDACTED] [REDACTED] that runs the café and they had [REDACTED] the girl with the . . .

Jim: Mmm-hmm.

Zera: . . . pony tail, sort of heavy-set woman over there.

Jim: Mmm-hmm.

Zera: . . . and that's cousin [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] granddaughter, [REDACTED] [REDACTED] was a middle-aged man. [REDACTED] [REDACTED] was probably 16 or 17, but they were really poor. And he married . . . a lot of those girls out there, you know, when they were just are so poor they just marry whoever ask 'em to get out of there. And she did, I think she kept him until he died, but then she married somebody else that was sort of well-to-do and he died and left her some money so she was able to buy the cafe. But, she's done well. She also, when she was married to [REDACTED] she used to ride the school bus down here and get off at Mama's and keep Ann while I taught school then she'd catch the school bus back home when I came home.

Jim: Hmm.

Zera: They'd let you do that, let you ride the school bus, you now. Back in the olden days.

Jim: Well, we've gone over a lot of school stuff, but there's one thing you mentioned that . . .

Heather: This is about to run out.

Jim: About to end?

Heather: One minute.

Jim: The Women's Club.

Heather: Oh.



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Jim: The Bruce Women's Club?

Heather: I can talk more about that maybe tomorrow. That'd be a long one.

Jim: It probably will. The Bruce Women's Club . . .

Heather: Yeah.

Jim: . . . has been going on for how many years?

Zera: Well, you see, it wasn't really chartered.

Jim: Uh-huh. It doesn't have to be.

Zera Well, we always had a club for as long as I can remember. We always met. We'd play bingo, take refreshments, visit, you know, and just have a get together, the women would, as long as I can remember. And then when, I think who chartered it was when we got a lady move to Bruce from Pensacola and she wanted to organize a woman's club, (b) (6) [REDACTED] She was our first president. She did a lot for Bruce. They bought the Wise Bluff fish camp. He was a retired Navy person. And she was, I don't know if she was a Swede or something, she was a strange lady, but very down to earth with good ideas. And her son went started school at Bruce. I taught him out there, [REDACTED] [REDACTED] Now, she had an older son before she married Mr. [REDACTED] He finished high school, joined the service, made an officer in the Navy, just really well-to-do. She raised her brother's daughter, [REDACTED] [REDACTED] who graduated from high school, went to FSU, made a teacher, married Wandell Childers who became a Representative, State of Florida, very well-to-do. Then she and Mr. [REDACTED] had [REDACTED] And I don't know what happened to her then. I know she was older. She said, "Now I want [REDACTED] to do what [REDACTED] wants to do." Well, you know what [REDACTED] wanted to do? Fish, and hunt and go in the woods. I think she got him through high school.

Ends at 01:02:31.