

ANNISTON HIGH SCHOOL - DESEGREGATION (BEFORE, DURING AND AFTER)

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ORAL HISTORY REPORT

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Most cities across the United States in the 1960s were in a state of continuation from the 1950s. The exception to this was the civil rights movement and desegregation. High school students of the 1950s, both black and white, had been raised under the confines of the Jim Crow system which hailed white supremacy and black subordination. Jim Crow did not introduced segregation into the south; it merely changed race relations, and had the backing of the law. Under the old system blacks were given "separate but equal" facilities in which to occupy. Providing "separate but equal" educational institution was a way in which the south could "make them good citizens."¹ This system though would come under attack in the mid 1950s. In 1954, the Supreme Court ruled (*Brown vs Kansas Board of Education*) that states were to desegregate their school systems, giving all school age children the same educational opportunities. This ruling sparked a revolution within both the black and white communities. Across the United States some school systems complied while other school systems resisted. In Alabama, after this court decision was handed down, they voted to "continue segregation through the next school year, or until the state educational system became directly involved in a racial suit."² Gordon Persons, Governor of Alabama stated, "the state constitution

¹ Dabney, Charles William. Universal Education in the South. New York: Arno Press and The New York Times, 1969. p. 433.

² Board votes Segregation, Ousts Hill. Anniston Star 9 July 1954: 1.

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constitution contains a provision for racial segregation in public schools and this provision has not been specifically declared void by any court."³ Therefore, segregation continued in the state of Alabama.^{4 5}

- The city of Anniston, Alabama was already divided by race in the 1960s. The white population lived on the east side, while the black population migrated to the west and south sides of town because of its industrial base. Blacks up to this point, had very little education; therefore, jobs were limited. Because of the limited job market, income for the average black was very low. Thus, most blacks lived in low income housing projects, dilapidated shacks, or modest type homes. This also meant that most black children had far fewer luxuries to enjoy than their counter-parts on the east side of town. Many black children had not been exposed to newspapers, magazines, radios, or televisions during their developmental years. This lack of luxuries it was felt, hindered their progress when entering high school, but "you can't blame the kids, they don't know better."⁶ so thought an administrator at Anniston High School.⁷

³ Public School Segregation voted on by Board of Education. Anniston Star 10 July 1954: 1-2.

⁴ Cooper, William J., and Thomas E. Terrill. The American South: A History. Volume II. NY: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1991. p. 550.

⁵ United States Reports. Volume 347. October Term 1953.

⁶ Johnson, Douglas. Tape recorded interview. 7 February 1995.

⁷ Johnson, Douglas. Tape recorded interview. 7 February 1995.

students were no different than most white students throughout the United States, they were self absorbed. Most of these students lived in middle class neighborhoods whose parents were either white collar workers or professionals. Most children on the east side of town had luxuries that afforded them the opportunity to observe what was happening around them. Luxuries such as newspapers, magazines, radios, and television helped white students get a head start in coping with the educational process offered to them.⁸

During the 1960s Anniston had two public high schools and a private school. Located on the east side of town was Anniston High School, and to the southeast, Anniston Academy (Donoho). Both schools were built to house white students only. Located on the west side of Anniston was Cobb High School which was built to house the communities black student population. As can be seen, the educational system in Anniston was already operating under the premise of the "separate but equal" system. A two to one ratio does not seem all that equal, but at this time one needs to remember that the local board of education was all white. Therefore, most revenue was delegated to the two white public schools. This un-equal revenue sharing had a profound impact on the quality of education students were able to receive. Anniston High School during this period "was very academic."⁹ The school was able to offer many more courses and activities than could be

⁸ Johnson, Douglas. Tape recorded interview. 7 February 1995.

⁹ Johnson, Douglas. Tape recorded interview. 7 February 1995.

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offered at Cobb High School. Each school had their own "set of standards which determined if a student could pass school."¹⁰ Since Cobb High School could not offer their students equivalent courses, their set of standards for graduating were lower than those at Anniston High School.¹¹

Most students at Anniston High School were not influenced by the civil rights movement in the early 1960s, but they were aware and at times sympathized with the plight of the black. Students whose heritage was linked to the "better-educated more wealthy part of the white community seemed far more sympathetic to the demands of the negroes and civil rights groups than the low-income, lesser-educated. Low-income, less-affluent whites profess the traditional stereotypes about negroes - that they have looser moral standards, prefer to live off handouts and other such long-held beliefs."¹² Low-income whites were afraid of blacks becoming their equal. As blacks worked their way up the economic ladder, they began moving to all white low-income neighborhoods, competing for jobs which were previously all white, and entering the neighborhoods all white school system. This economic division among the white community was further fueled by two very powerful individuals: George Wallace and Martin Luther King, Jr.^{13 14}

¹⁰ Johnson, Douglas. Tape recorded interview. 7 February 1995.

¹¹ Johnson, Douglas. Tape recorded interview. 7 February 1995.

¹² Harris, Louis. Whites Differ On Race Woes. Anniston Star. 16 August 1966.

¹³ Johnson, Douglas. Tape recorded interview. 7 February 1995.

¹⁴ Larkin, Ralph W. Suburban Youth in Cultural Crisis. New York: Oxford Press, 1979. pages 50-55.

George Wallace began his long political career in 1946 when he was elected to the state legislature. In 1958 he ran for and lost the gubernatorial race. George Wallace was determined to win the next election, so in 1962 he ran on a racist platform. His platform called for "segregation now! segregation tomorrow! segregation forever!"¹⁵ By this time, George Wallace had built a powerful political machine which enabled him to capture both black and white votes. "People did not like him, but both blacks and whites voted for him."¹⁶

Martin Luther King, Jr. was a Baptist minister and civil rights leader. By the early 1960s he had become the moral voice of civil rights. Martin Luther King, Jr. wanted to "destroy barriers of fear and insecurities that had been hundreds of years in the making."¹⁷ Martin Luther King, Jr. could reach into the depth of one's soul, yet black students in the city of Anniston seemed to go untouched by him. "If blacks were influenced by him, it was not openly shown."¹⁸ The city of Anniston somehow escaped a lot of the turmoil associated with the civil rights movement.

The objective of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was to secure for black children "entry into predominately white schools."¹⁹ Desegregation was the "assignment of students to public school

¹⁵ Wilson Charles R., and William Ferris. Encyclopedia of Southern Culture. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1989. p. 1200.

¹⁶ Johnson, Douglas. Taped recorded interview. 7 February 1995.

¹⁷ Garraty John A., and Mark C. Carnes. Dictionary of American Biography. Supplement Eight, 1966-1970. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1988. p. 332.

¹⁸ Johnson, Douglas. Taped recorded interview. 7 February 1995.

¹⁹ Wilson, Lyle. 1964 Rights Act Challenges New Look In Race Relations. Anniston Star 8 October 1966.

without regard to their race, color, religion or national origin, but desegregation shall not mean the assignment of students to public schools in order to overcome racial imbalance."²⁰ In response to this, Governor Wallace pushed for a law that would prohibit Alabama school systems from desegregating. Local and state school boards objected to the governor's stand because it would cause federal funding to be withheld, place their fate in the hands of the governor, and cause the immediate needs of the schools to go unattended. Local and state school boards were not the only one's frustrated over this controversy. School supporters were looking forward to a productive school year with as little interruption as possible. In the city of Anniston, a statement was issued asking "citizens to remain alert and guard against disruptions in our school program and foolhardy incidents or demonstrations which could lead to violence and mob action, threatening the safety and welfare of our school children."²¹

This controversy frustrated some whites within the city of Anniston because they wanted their children to remain segregated from the black students. In 1966 the city of Anniston sent out freedom of choice forms to be filled out and returned before students could officially enrolled in the cities school system. These forms were sent to all city residents in Anniston to give parents or guardians an opportunity to choose their child's school

²⁰ Wilson, Lyle. 1964 Rights Act Challenges New Look In Race Relations. Anniston Star 8 October 1966.

²¹ Editorial. Schools In The Middle. Anniston Star. 27 August 1967.

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assignment. This freedom of choice form could also be used by Anniston's Board of Education as a guide to indicate whether or not desegregation would be easily accomplished. This form could estimate the number of students lost to private schools or to schools outside of the cities school district.²²

Whites within Anniston's city school system had three choices. The first choice was aimed at the more affluent, well-educated white segment of Anniston's population. These parents could chose to send their children to Anniston Academy, which opened its doors in 1963. Anniston Academy accommodated students in grades seventh through twelfth, offered a wide range of courses and activities, and employed white teachers only. Students attending Anniston Academy not only remained separate from blacks, but had a much better chance of attending college because of its high academic standards. Since most white's within the Anniston School system were not wealthy, they either had to stay and hope that their children's education was maintained, or they could choose to move outside of Anniston's school district. Once desegregation began in 1967, white flight became the norm within the city of Anniston. White flight refers to a segment of the population that voluntarily moves from their established neighborhood in order to maintain a certain standard of living. White flight usually begins because of preconceived perceptions obtained through someone else's past

²² School 'Choice' Forms Wanted By City System. Anniston Star. 8 August 1966.

White flight refers to a segment of the population that voluntarily moves from their established neighborhood in order to maintain a certain standard of living. White flight usually begins because of preconceived perceptions obtained through someone else's past experiences.²³ ²⁴ In 1967 "some 250 black students were made to enter Anniston High School."²⁵ These black students were now being given the same educational opportunities as the white students, but as with anything unknown, most of the black students "didn't want to come, so they made them come."²⁶ The problem with forced desegregation at Anniston High School in the beginning was the parents. "If parents stayed out of it, the kids would work out their own problems."²⁷ Parents, especially low class whites, did not stay out of the desegregation question, and it resulted in someone trying to burn the school down. Other than this incident, it was "just a matter of adjusting to the situation" for both the black and white students."²⁸

Desegregation within Anniston's city school system also included teacher transfers to schools of opposite race. It was felt by some school superintendents in Alabama that teachers were reluctant to transfer to schools of the opposite race. Even though Anniston High School began student desegregation in the mid 1960s,

²³ Skinner, Linda. Anniston Academy To Be Buzzing With Activity. Anniston Star. 16 August 1967.

²⁴ Johnson, Douglas. Taped recorded interview. 7 February 1995.

²⁵ Johnson, Douglas. Taped recorded interview. 7 February 1995.

²⁶ Johnson, Douglas. Taped recorded interview. 7 February 1995.

²⁷ Johnson, Douglas. Taped recorded interview. 7 February 1995.

²⁸ Johnson, Douglas. Taped recorded interview. 7 February 1995.

trapped in segregated schools for all their education, produced their own teachers in schools inferior in every respect to white schools."²⁹ Yet, many blacks once they obtained the security of teaching jobs, sought to upgrade their skills by seeking advanced degrees in integrated graduate schools of education. Black teachers entering Anniston High School took up the challenge, and became some of our best teachers.^{30 31}

In the beginning, desegregation problems facing the administrators and teachers were basic. As was stated in the beginning, white students had a distinct advantage over most of their black counterparts; therefore, learning for some started at the bottom. Once desegregation occurred at Anniston High School, school officials had to address problems of illiteracy among some of its black students. Once these students were identified, they were tested, and put into one of three categories. There was a big difference between each of these three categories. Teachers had to start at the bottom and work their way up because some students did not know how to read or write. Generally, students given the proper disciplinary and academic tools would excel and move to the next category. Those students who failed to pass out of a category were usually from a lower socioeconomic background. These students

²⁹ Staff Reports Submitted to the United States Commission on Civil Rights. Civil Rights USA: Public Schools Southern States 1962. New York: Greenwood Press, Publishers. 1968. p. 152.

³⁰ Thomas, Rex. Faculty Mixing Woe For School Chiefs. Anniston Star. 15 August 1967.

³¹ Johnson, Douglas. Tape recorded interview. 7 February 1995.

were apt to be disciplinary problems, and were tardy or absent a good part of the school year. Most students, however, just wanted to be treated judiciously academically and socially. Administrators and teachers at Anniston High School tried very hard to be just to each segment of the student body. In the 1960s homecoming at Anniston High school produced one white king and queen. The black student body felt they were being treated unfairly because the majority of students were white. So, in the 1970s the black student body responded with a sit-in protesting what they felt was racism. The administration agreed with the black student body, and allowed for two kings and queens to be elected for the next homecoming dance. This compromise satisfied both segments of the student body.³²

Another area of equality being demanded at Anniston High School was the integration of blacks into the schools sport program. Between 1966 and 1968 colleges as well as high schools throughout the United States were integrating blacks into their sports programs. Blacks began coming to try outs for football, basketball, and baseball during the late 1960s and early 1970s. The one sport that did not see blacks trying out for was tennis. The tennis team at Anniston High School was dominated by white male students, who were wealthy, academically inclined, and felt superior to others. When desegregation began, most of these students transferred to private schools, leaving Anniston High

³² Johnson, Douglas. Tape recorded interview. 7 February 1995.

School without much of a tennis team. Student athletes at Anniston High School seemed to have very few problems in adjusting to each other on the field, yet off the field, they voluntarily segregated themselves. Integration of student athletes at Anniston High School also helped to bridge racial tension within the black and white community. Parents, both black and white, attended games when it was economically feasible. On any given game night, there were usually more whites in the stands than blacks, however, this disparity was not racial it was financial. Most black athletes were poor, and their parents could not afford spending a few dollars a game on entrance fees.³³

The south had two very distinct communities, black and white.

This separation of races began because of past ideas and experiences. Fear among white southerner's escalated as blacks began demanding equal rights. Equal rights that would place them on the same level as whites. To eliminate the possibility that blacks would become their equal, white southern democrats began a campaign that would disenfranchise blacks. Jim Crow was instituted in the 1890s to define the blacks world, and keep white supremacy alive. Formal, written regulations and informal, unwritten regulations were put in place to determine the boundaries of black behavior. Jim Crow went uncontested, and had the backing of the law until the mid 1950s and 1960s when a civil rights movement began.

³³ Johnson, Douglas. Tape recorded interview. 7 February 1995.

regulations were put in place to determine the boundaries of black behavior. Jim Crow went uncontested, and had the backing of the law until the mid 1950s and 1960s when a civil rights movement began.

In Alabama, the civil rights movement was being fought in the court room and on the street. Two powerful political figures emerged at this time, one fighting to keep segregation, the other fighting to abolish segregation. These two powerful individuals were able to draw upon the emotions of the people. Emotions among the southern population ranged from indifference to very violent outbursts. Many cities in Alabama experienced sit-in, riots, protests, and marches. The city of Anniston, however, seems to have escaped the disorder associated with the civil rights movement. Steps taken, however, by black leaders were to work within the legal system by filing suit in 1966 against the city's Board of Education. The suit against the city's Board of Education demanded that they comply with federal guidelines to desegregate students, and faculty within the city's school system, as well as desegregating their central office staff. Even after the filing of this suit, the city of Anniston maintained a dual school system. Desegregation was beginning, but on a limited basis. It would not be until 1967 that desegregation of educational facilities would be fully realized.³⁴

³⁴ Plott, Bill. Compliance Sought, Systems Vowed Aid: Suit Instituted by Local Pastor. Anniston Star. 30 August 1966. pgs 1-2.

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Gift and Release Agreement

We Elaine M Romano and DOUGLAS Y JOHNSON
Interviewer (print) Interviewee (print)

do hereby give and grant to Dr. Suzanne Marshall, Assistant Professor of History, Jacksonville State University, all literary and property rights, title, and interest which we may possess to the audio or video recording(s) and transcript(s) of the interview(s) conducted at

on the date(s) of Feb 7, 1995
for the oral history collection being compiled by Dr. Marshall.

Douglas Y Johnson
Interviewee's signature
Address 500 1/2 Ave
Jacksonville, Ala
Phone 435 2782

Date 2-7-95

Elaine M Romano
Interviewer's signature
Address 301 Museo Dr SE
Jville, AL 36265
Phone 435-7236

Date 2-7-95

INTERVIEWEE BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Name: Douglas Johnson M/F male
Address: 308 7th Ave N.E. Fulla Ala
Phone number(s): 4352782
Approximate age or date of birth: May 26 - 1927
Mother's Name: Annie Johnson
Father's Name: Robert Johnson
Places lived and when: Calhan Courts

Education: MA Ed AA Jack State
Religion: Baptist
Business, political and social memberships (past and present): Democrat

Present occupation: Ret
Former occupations: Director 100 Ed Annette City
Special Skills: Sub. History
Major Accomplishments: Basketball Coach & History Teacher Director 100 Ed
National Events in which interviewee has participated:

Local Events in which interviewee has participated:

National born U.S. citizen? Yes/No
Naturalized Citizen: Yes/No Date: all life
Country from which he/she emigrated:
Documents, photographs, and artifacts which are in the possession of the interviewee:

Individuals recommended by the interviewee who might be candidates for an oral history interview:

Additional information:

Interviewee Background Information

Name: Douglas Y. Johnson
Address: 500 7th Avenue NE
Jacksonville, Alabama 36265
Telephone Number: (205)435-2782
Date of Birth: May 26, 1927
Mother's Name: Annie Johnson
Father's Name: Robert Johnson
Places lived
and when: Calhoun County
Education: MA Alabama
AA Jacksonville State University
Religion: Baptist
Political
membership: Democrat
Present Occupation: Retired
Anniston High School 1960-1971
History teacher and basketball
coach
Vocational School 1971-1987
Director
National born
U.S.citizen: Yes

*Segregation →
Desegregation at Anniston High School*

PREPARED QUESTIONS

1. When did you start teaching at Anniston High School?
2. What was the student population at Anniston High School?
3. What was the atmosphere at the high school before desegregation?
4. Was there a social dividing line between the students at the high school during the early 1960s?
5. During the early period of desegregation, were there any problems at Anniston High School?
6. What effect did Governor George Wallace have in Anniston? What effect did he have on Anniston High School?
7. Where there demonstrations, sit-ins at Anniston High School during this time?
8. What was Anniston's Board of Education's reaction to desegregation?
9. Did you notice any change in the schools student population once blacks entered the school system?
10. Did the white population feel that their children were being denied a quality education?
11. What influence did Martin Luther King, Jr. have on the students here in Anniston?
12. As an educator what was your feelings on the Civil Rights Bill of 1964?
13. What was the economic atmosphere in Anniston in association to Anniston High School?
14. Was there any difference in the funding after white students left the high school?
15. As a coach at Anniston High School what was your feeling about the 1967-68 admission of black varsity basketball players to the SEC?
16. How did the white athletes at Anniston High School feel about desegregation of their schools athletic program?

17. Where teachers taught to handle language problems that might be encountered with desegregation?
18. Was there any impact on the students from the religious community?
19. After desegregation what was the feeling of the student body at Anniston High School?
20. Did the sports programs at Anniston High School help the transition process?