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Interview
with
J. C. WATKINS
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By Goldie F. Wells

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INTERVIEW WITH MR. J.C. WATKINS

Goldie: Today's date is January 19, 1991, in Charlotte, North Carolina and I am talking to Mr. J.C. Watkins who was a 1964 principal. He was principal of a school in Rockingham, N.C. but we are meeting in Charlotte because it is more convenient. Mr. Watkins, I would like for you to introduce yourself and say that you know that this is being recorded.

Mr. Watkins: I am J.C. Watkins and I am a retired school principal, and I am aware that what I am saying is being recorded.

Goldie: Mr. Watkins, I am doing some research comparing the roles of Black high school principals of 1964, with those of 1989, and I would like for you to tell me some things that would be helpful for my research. I want you to tell me something about yourself and how you became a high school principal.

Mr. Watkins: From my earliest years I wanted to be a teacher and then after I got into teaching my ambition was to be a principal. Of course, back in that day, this is in the early forties when I started teaching, principalships--in fact teaching positions--were rather scarce because there was a surplus of Black teachers and Black principals. So I knew in order to be a principal I needed to be prepared as well or better than anyone else. So, I chose to go to Columbia University which I had read about and knew was a top school for training school administrators and I did my training in administration at Columbia University. I was student teaching and then I was teaching for about twelve years when the principal at the school I was teaching at died. Of course they had to select a new principal. Now I didn't automatically get that position. I was rather young and they considered me too young to be a principal at that time. I believe I was about 29 years old and they were looking for a more mature person and of course I said that principalships were scarce. They had 51 applications for that position so the superintendent told me but after looking at my application and the fact that I had been there for about 12 years in the school and I knew the community they decided to take the chance with me. That is how I became principal of the school. Of course, at that time it was a union school, grades 1-12. I remained there until I left the principalship.

Goldie: Do you have any educators in your family?

Mr. Watkins: Yes, I do. Of course I was the first of my family to receive a college degree. I came from a large family in a rural area. In fact my parents at one time were tenant farmers but my father bought the farm before I became

a teacher, and he owned quite a bit of land when he passed away. I do have one younger sister who is a teacher and has been in Wake County for all of her career. She was head of the Exceptional Children's Program in Wake County. She was but she became ill about a year ago. She has multiple sclerosis and she is not teaching now.

Goldie: I want you to tell me about the high school where you were the principal. Tell me about the students you had, the teachers you had and how many and what community and all of that.

Mr. Watkins: Well, this is in Rockingham and I became principal in 1955, I believe it was. At that time it was called Rockingham Colored High School and the school had about 500 students all together. Probably about 300 in the elementary and 200 in the high school. The school served not only the Rockingham community but a few nearby communities. It was a city system. In Richmond County at that time we had three school systems. The Hamlet City School System, the Rockingham City School System and the Richmond County School System. There were about 20 members on the faculty when I took over. It was an unusual situation because this is the school where I also attended high school. And of course there are advantages and disadvantages for coming back home and teaching and I signify the disadvantages because I had only been away four years and some of the students who were still in high school knew me as a high school student, and I had some problems for a while until those kind of moved on out. We had about 400 students and students were quite different in that day and they became later on about the time I retired. They were not as assertive as students were later on. They were polite, you know they listened and tried to do everything the teacher said do. You had some discipline problems but they were not severe and not the kind you hear of in schools today.

Goldie: Now I'm going to ask you something about your responsibilities that you had and how you dealt with them-- the supervision of your personnel and selection of teachers.

Mr. Watkins: Well, at that time teacher selection was just about 100% done by the principal. The Board of Education sort of took a hands-off policy toward Black schools unless there was a local Black teacher who wanted to get into the system and sometimes then they might try some pressuring to get in. Now I was not all that opposed to local teachers because I was local but when I interviewed and employed a new teacher I tried to get the best person I could find and I did turn down local people and that didn't make me popular when I did that but I think people finally understood I wanted good teachers. They accepted the fact that I didn't hire all local teachers just because they were local. But I had pretty much free run of selecting the staff I wanted and of course I had

plenty of applications to select from just as they had principals because when colleges had commencement in the spring I could hardly do any kind of planning because there was a steady stream of people in the office looking for teaching jobs, Of course I did at least try to meet all of them and would give them an application. I couldn't talk with them because in the first place I didn't have a lot of vacancies and I didn't have the time but I was courteous to them and I would talk with them and give them applications and if I had a vacancy later on I would look up the applications and screen them out and interview for a position that we might need.

Goldie: How did you supervise them once you employed them?

Mr. Watkins: All right. I always believed that the principal's role was the improvement of instructional programs. That was my philosophy. Now not being negative about Black principals but I had observed in the past when I started teaching that a lot of Black principals that I saw did not seem to be interested in the instructional program. They seemed to be interested in maybe athletics, raising money or some other thing but not too interested in the instructional program, and I decided that I was going to try to upgrade instructional program. Of course I knew there were certain funds you would have to raise because as I said, the school boards in that day took more of a hands-off attitude toward Black schools. You only got the bare minimum of materials and equipment and that type thing so if you wanted something above the bare necessities, you had to get out and raise funds for it. We did not raise a lot of funds after I became principal. We had one fund raiser a year and that was it. We didn't raise any more funds. Of course we had some athletic programs, basketball primarily. I was under great pressure from the community to have football because one of the neighboring towns had football but it required--I talked with the principal and he spent a lot of time raising money to buy equipment and whatnot to operate a football team and that is what I said I did not want to get into so I warded off football until my last year there. But the last year when schools started integrating, and of course the White school already had football, and when they integrated they were interested in getting Black players in. They gave us some equipment to get started with football and so we did have a couple of years when I was there that there was a football team but I did not push football there. Therefore, I spent my time in trying to do in-service with the faculty in upgrading their skills and also supervising and discipline in their classrooms and seeing what was going on in the instructional program.

Goldie: What happened if you got one that wasn't doing a very good job?

Mr. Watkins: Well, I guess I developed a technique. I don't ever recall telling one teacher I was not going to rehire. I had several to leave. When we talked and they understood what I was looking for and what we wanted to do, they could see that they weren't doing that so they just voluntarily left. So I did not have to outright fire them.

Goldie: Curriculum and instruction. You've already touched on it but that was your main focus?

Mr. Watkins: Yes, curriculum and instruction was my main focus and I did all that I could to improve the curriculum with the staff we had. Of course, every time I hired a new teacher I tried to _____ and we had an excellent staff. The Leakstreet School in the county was looked on as the top school in most respects by other Black schools and of course by the White communities as being the best Black school. But we weren't the best school. They thought we were the best Black school because we had a right good instructional program. We had good teachers and when the schools were integrated there was a real rush because when the schools integrated the high school was closed and the principals, because they were White supervisors in the school, knew the good teachers and they were really in a rush to select. There weren't but one or two that people really didn't almost fight over to get and out of that group later on we had a North Carolina Teacher of the Year who came up with me at Leakstreet. We also had another teacher who became the Dean of Instruction at the School of Math and Science who was a Leakstreet School biology teacher. So we developed some good teachers at Leakstreet.

Goldie: How did you deal with discipline?

Mr. Watkins: Well, as I said discipline wasn't a real problem but it was a problem. Truancy was I guess the biggest problem we had. We had a communication problems with the homes. I never did try to get that going good because at that time most of our parents did not have telephones. So the only communication we had, you know, you either had to go to the home or you might see a parent downtown to talk to them about it. So we did not have the kind of communication like now between the school and the home. Our teachers weren't required to visit homes but they were encouraged. When I first started teaching we were required--we had to visit every home as a teacher the first month of school but later on we did not require it but it was encouraged and teachers did visit homes. So truancy was the main problem. We had a few other problems, maybe students getting into a fight, occasionally you would have alcohol. When I first became principal at prom time that was a problem. That was prom time and they had been accustomed to it and they would have alcohol there. Well, I solved that problem. First of all I invited all the parents to come to the prom. I sent a

letter inviting all of the parents to be our guests. Then no student could leave the prom until it was over so what had been happening before was they would just go in and out at intermission and they had alcohol in the car and they would drink and come back. We had a policy that once you came to the prom you didn't leave until the prom was over unless your parents came to get you. On one occasion a boy slipped some in and had it down in the bathroom. We got him and of course he suffered the consequences but that solved the alcohol problem at proms. So those were the kinds of problems you had back in that day. Of course on buses you had discipline problems on buses because you had student drivers and you know talking and occasional fighting on the bus and that kind of thing and we dealt with that. In a lot of cases warnings would take care of it and then if it got real serious you just had to get off the bus for a day or two depending on the seriousness of the situation. That usually took care of that kind of problem.

Goldie: Tell me about transportation.

Mr. Watkins: We had buses. When I became principal we had maybe five or six buses which was pretty adequate for that school because we only brought students in from two or three nearby communities and we didn't have any real problems with transportation. Of course at that time too the buses were adequate because the state had developed a policy that if you got a new bus you kept it until you wore it out. In years past when I was in high school you got a hand-me-down bus and it was already worn out when you got it and as a student we had buses that wouldn't go up a hill many times and we had to get out and push it. The students helped push it up the hill because it was just worn out. But when I became principal that was not the case. We had adequate transportation.

Goldie: How many buses did you have--five and all student drivers?

Mr. Watkins: All student drivers. I don't recall having an adult at any time. When I was in high school as a student we had an adult driver but we only had one bus though but when I was there we had all student drivers.

Goldie: Did you have an assistant?

Mr. Watkins: Before I left there I did but when I became principal of that school I didn't have a secretary and I taught two classes. So you see I didn't have much time for supervision of the staff. We had to do the book work for treasurer--I did ask a faculty member to act as treasurer. She had one period a day. All teachers had a study hall in high school, teachers did. So she could take her study hall period and keep the financial records. But everything else, typing, correspondence, I did it all. It was very time

consuming. I just left the office when I got through and sometimes I would be sitting in the office and I would hear the textile mills--they changed shifts at midnight and I would hear the whistle blow and I would say it is time to go home now. I didn't do this every night but there were occasions to get the work done, you either took it home or you would come back and do it at night or weekends because we didn't have clerical help. Finally I did get a secretary and I still was teaching maybe one or two classes. Then it was in the sixties when Title I came into being. When Title I came in there were only two Black schools in the city system. There was a two teacher Black school out on the edge of town and that had been consolidated with the Leakstreet School before integration so there was only one Black school in the city system and that was the only school that qualified for Title I funds because it was lower income people and the White schools there were three White schools. I believe one of the White schools got it. There was a school in the mill village that qualified. But the principal didn't seem to be interested in the funds so I got most of the funds for Leakstreet and of course with those funds we were able to hire additional teachers. We put in a special tutorial program and we had maybe six, eight or ten additional teachers to help students on an individual basis in special classes. I also had an assistant principal at that time that came out of that program. Also we had an attendance counselor out of that program which meant that we had somebody to go to the homes and visit and help out with the kids and that kind of thing so I then had adequate staff and materials because you could use Title I money to buy materials and some equipment. You could get science equipment, furniture, some schools even bought band uniforms and band instruments. We didn't do that. We put it all in the instructional program. Some bought activity buses out of that money but we didn't do that kind of thing. However, here again we didn't get all the benefits of Title I because we found out later on that some of that money was being siphoned off to other schools that didn't qualify. It was discovered and there was an article written in the Charlotte Observer about one of their reporters who came to investigate it and it made headlines. After that we did get all the funds but until that time the funds were being siphoned off.

Goldie: What about the utilization of funds? How did you get your funds and how did you use them--the ones that came locally. I know Title I was one of the federal funds. The funds you got from the city and the county.

Mr. Watkins: Prior to that we had state funds and local funds. Of course we got money based on the state allocation of monies. There was so much for library, so much for materials, and so much for equipment. It wasn't a whole lot. If I can recall, it might have been a dollar per student for instruction materials. But whatever we got we had it in a

printout from the superintendent's office with each school's allocation. And of course, we were limited to use that as we wanted to without many strings attached. Students also paid fees. I think it was a dollar and a quarter for instructional and art fee and that was used to supplement it. Now of course when you had the NDEA program that came along after sputnik we went to the National Defense Education Act and that fund provided quite a bit of money for science and mathematics equipment and so we were able to upgrade the curriculum with that money.

Goldie: Cafeteria management.

Mr. Watkins: Well, when I became principal, yes, we had a cafeteria then--I was trying to think back when I was teaching--we did not have a cafeteria. But somewhere in the fifties we built a new addition of the school--at least we built one new building and it did include a cafeteria and we had a cafeteria manager. She was quite efficient. I had to do all the bookwork but she did the menus, the ordering of food and taking charge of serving and whatnot. She handled all of that. As I recall we had maybe three or four people on the staff in the cafeteria. The only thing that I was concerned about was keeping the records. That was quite a choir because the state had put in an awful system of keeping records and I don't think our books ever did get balanced. The reimbursements were always coming six months late and you had to estimate what they were going to be. It was a hard thing to do but we got through it.

Goldie: Buildings and grounds.

Mr. Watkins: We had a janitor full time and a maid. Later on I think we had two maids and maybe another janitor when we got some Title I funds. They were paid very little, cafeteria workers also. Until the minimum wage law came into effect I believe cafeteria people got something like about \$40-\$50 a month. They were required to work eight hours a day. Soon the mandatory minimum wage laws came into effect and of course when they came into effect I believe it was probably about a dollar and something an hour but not more than \$2 an hour, the minimum wage. They had to pay minimum wage but the same work folk had been doing in eight hours you could now do it in four hours, because they didn't want to pay you that \$2 an hour. That would have been \$16 a day and you didn't get that much in a weeks time before so they just cut the hours. The cafeteria wasn't the same. The cafeteria women just had to rush out after they served lunch sometimes they had to work overtime because they couldn't get cleaned up. They had to come in at seven or eight o'clock in the morning and if they worked four or five hours a day they would be through at 1:00 and they could hardly get cleaned up and out of there at 1:00.

Goldie: But you were responsible for overseeing the cafeteria, overseeing buildings and grounds and everything.

Mr. Watkins: That is right.

Goldie: What about community relations. How did Leakstreet fit into your community? What did the community think about it?

Mr. Watkins: I had excellent support. Prior to my becoming principal, the principal that preceded me had a very different philosophy that I had toward community relations. There was no PTA, there was hardly any communication between the school and community and so the community didn't support the school. There was a pretty negative attitude. But of course I was a local person and I knew people in the community and of course I wanted to do it so when I became principal I told the community we need your help. If we are going to have a good school--we need your help. These are your children and we want to work with you. So I organized a PTA which was well supported and whatever we did we had a student council which got students involved in school and with the parents who were involved. We had an excellent community who supported me very well. I don't have any complaints even today. They were proud of Leakstreet School.

Goldie: How much administrative power and control do you think you had over your school site and your responsibilities?

Mr. Watkins: Well, I wouldn't say it was absolute but it could have been if I had wanted to because the school board and the school administration from the central office just took a hands-off policy and as long as we didn't get any complaints from the school or the community then they didn't seem to much care what went on. So I could be any kind of administrator I wanted to be. I chose to be and I consider myself pretty democratic because I involved the staff and we sat down and we planned together. Now I had the veto power. I would have the last word but we would try to get a consensus you know and if I felt or if there was something they wanted to do and I thought it was good for the school then they did it. They knew their ideas were going to be accepted and used if possible, and so we had a pretty good relationship with the staff.

Goldie: How did the desegregation of schools affect your principalship?

Mr. Watkins: Well, in the first year of desegregation they closed the high school department and the high school staff and students went to former White schools. The school I was at remained an all Black elementary school 1-8. It affected me in that my salary was affected because your salary is

based on the number of teachers you have. I lost a third or more of my staff to the White schools so it affected my salary. I went to the Board of Education though and told them and asked them you know because in some cases they were supplementing principals who lost teachers because of integration but they told me they didn't have any funds and couldn't do it without the funds so I was affected salary-wise. I didn't have as much to do because when I had the high school I probably spent more time with the high school department than the elementary students and because of hard discipline I'm not saying it wasn't a bad thing, it wasn't real bad but you had problems every day that you had to deal with. In an elementary school you didn't have that kind of thing. Teachers for the most part helped with the discipline problems in the elementary schools but in high school I'd end up getting most of the discipline problems. I didn't have an assistant until my last couple of years so I had to handle all of the discipline problems so when the high school left that was certainly a relief. Now of course I didn't have any extra curricular activities to be concerned with like basketball games you know and so I just felt real free when they left, except when I got my paycheck.

Goldie: Did they do anything about it when you went to them about it.

Mr. Watkins: No, except to say they didn't have any funds to supplement it and I would just have to make out. But that wasn't but one or two years because after a year or two the schools in our county were integrated and of course the school I was at was integrated also. When we first integrated Leakstreet it became grades 5,6,7, and 8 and when they brought the students into those grades I had as many or more teachers as I had. So my enrollment went back up and so my salary was back where it was, maybe even a little bit better. So it was integrated from then on.

Goldie: Did you find any difference in supervising Black teachers and White teachers?

Mr. Watkins: I don't think a great deal. I guess I anticipated or was a little anxious about how it was going to work you know as all of us were. And of course, Leakstreet had been an all Black school and there was reluctance on the part of the White community to send their children to a former Black school in the heart of a Black community. So that was a problem that we had to deal with. Of course we came through it rather successfully. There was a private school built in the county and the first year we had a good number of students who went to that private school but the year before integration we knew we were going to integrate. And that whole year we spent getting ready for integration. When the administration knew that we were going to have to do it and decided to do it then an effort was made to get us

ready. We had meetings at the high school level, the students met, and set up the student government. It just so happened that made it easier and this was not for the school that I was at, but we consolidated the whole system that year of integration. We had only one system. A new high school was built and was going to open that year, the first year of consolidation and all of those students in all the high schools met during the year. They selected the school colors for that new school, they selected a mascot, student government and everything so when they went there in the fall for the first time it wasn't somebody coming to my school because all of them were new at the school. Where I was we did the same thing with the staff. We didn't have a lot of students meeting together but we met with the teachers who were going to be at that school from time to time. I know prior to the closing of school that year we had a rather long session with them. We talked about the next year and the problems we looked to and how we were going to solve them. I think I gave them their room assignments maybe at the close of school. I think we had a meeting during the workdays at the end of the school year and they came over to the school and of course the Black teachers who were going to still be there. We had a meeting and I had already assigned their rooms and so they had a chance after we talked about the school and how we operated and then they went to see their rooms. Of course I told them that I would be there all summer if they wanted to come back in the summer time and start looking at their rooms and anything they needed we would try to get them in place prior to that. The whole summer the teachers were in and out getting their rooms ready and of course we had open house I believe in the Fall so of course the White parents came in the summer too. They came to see the school and some wanted to get special consideration for their students--where they wanted them placed and that kind of thing.

Goldie: How long did you serve as a principal of the integrated situation?

Mr. Watkins: I don't think it was ten years but it was a good number of years. I stayed there as principal until I was elected to be Assistant Superintendent.

Goldie: Did you enjoy your job?

Mr. Watkins: Very much. I used to say to teachers and other educators, I would hear them complain about I'm going to retire, I wish I was out of this and just come in the morning complaining and I told them--I have problems everyday but I look forward to going to school and to work everyday. I enjoyed everyday--not that every day is as pleasant as the other. I didn't retire because I didn't like my work. I set a time that I thought I was going to retire years ago and I said when I got to be 62 years old and could draw my social

security and my retirement too, I was going to retire and I worked 41 years and I retired.

Goldie: What do you consider the major problem of your principalship?

Mr. Watkins: I don't know. I guess the major problem may have been with instructional staff. I'm talking of the Black teachers now. The elementary Black teachers their preparation was not what it should have been. Especially the older ones. They were good teachers in that they took an interest in the students and they did a good job of that kind of thing but as far as subject matter, they were not as well versed as I would have liked to have seen them. We worked on that some because a lot of them started teaching, in fact I had one lady who started teaching a year after she finished high school, and the others went to normal school back then and of course all of them finally had college degrees because they worked during the summer. But I guess that was the weakness as I saw it but as far as dedication and doing a good job I think they did well. I guess that was one of the main problems that I saw. Of course the curriculum the disgrace especially at the high school level and I guess at the elementary level too because of the limited staff we had we could not offer the things that we knew our students needed, especially in the vocational area. We could only offer the basic things that were required for graduation and a little commercial--we had typing, bookkeeping and a home ec area and we had a course in bricklaying I think. That was about the extent of the vocational program that we had and that just was not adequate for our students.

Goldie: What do you consider most rewarding about your principalship?

Mr. Watkins: I guess the most rewarding thing and that is even happening now is when I can see students that I taught and they come back and they thank you and sometimes they just are really enthusiastic. We had a class reunion some years ago, the first one the school had and I guess they had a program in the auditorium and it was packed with 400-500 and it was just overwhelming for them to come back and express their appreciation for what teachers did for them back in that day. So I think that is my biggest reward from it.

Goldie: If you knew of a young Black person, male or female, that wanted to be a high school principal in North Carolina, what advice would you give?

Mr. Watkins: Be sure that you want to teach and work with young people and not be concerned about the pay. That is important. You have to have a home and that kind of thing but unless you really want to help young people, then don't go into it. If you really want to see young people develop

with all the problems that they present, if you aren't ready to meet that challenge, then I would say don't go into it.

Goldie: Do you think that there was someone who was your mentor along the way?

Mr. Watkins: I can't recall anyone person or teacher well, until I got in high school. I had a math teacher, I think her name was Mrs. Susan Matherson, that really inspired me when she taught me math in the eighth grade. At that time that was first year of high school.

Goldie: We have come to the end of the interview guide but if you have any words of wisdom that you would like to give, please do.

Mr. Watkins: Well, I don't have any real words of wisdom except for anybody who is in the principalship, administration except just do a good job so that when you go home at night you feel that you have given it your best and if you do that when you come to retirement you aren't going to have a lot of regrets. That is the way I feel.

Goldie: Do you have any concerns about Black males today?

Mr. Watkins: I really do. I have a lot of concern about the Black males in particular because--well those who are young who, in teaching, I try to encourage some of them to go into administration and there were some I thought had real potential but they haven't shown much interest in it. I'm talking to a young man now who says he is going into it because there is definite need for young Blacks to get into the classroom and into administration and I would certainly encourage if there are those who are dedicated and want to do that kind of thing I would encourage them to get into it.

Goldie: Thank you so much Mr. Watkins. I really appreciate you taking the time to interview. This almost ends my interviews and I'm so glad that you talked to me because you have a wealth of knowledge because you were one of those that remained through integration and some of the did not. I appreciate you taking the time.

Mr. Watkins: Well, thank you and I'm just glad that you contacted me and invited me. I enjoyed sitting and talking with you.

Goldie: These tapes will be archived in Chapel Hill. I am going to send you a copy of what we have done because it will be transcribed. I will send copies and then you will get a release form back to me and then we have them in the Southern collection down in Chapel Hill.