

Interviewee: Wallace, Arthur
Interviewer: Jennifer Lanzing
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Lanzing: When and where were you born?

Wallace: I was born in Harpersville, AL, October the 11th, 1949 to the parents of John T and Annie Wallace.

Lanzing: Was your town predominantly white or black?

Wallace: Our town was a rural farm area, probably about 60% white, 40% black. Rural farming area on both sides, black and white.

Lanzing: Were your parents farmers?

Wallace: My father was a farmer, but he also worked at the paper plant, Kimberly-Clark where we farmed also.

Lanzing: Did you attend segregated schools?

Wallace: I attended all black school. Graduated in 1968. In 1968, the school was segregated, but I finished, I remained at the black school.

Lanzing: How did the black school compare with the white school?

Wallace: During our time, in a rural area, we didn't have all that racial problem. The white school, as a matter of fact, we played football on their field during the time, and we got along fine because we used to practice with them when I was coming up, and we didn't have any problems, but we segregated with the schools.

Lanzing: Were there any problems when the schools became integrated?

Wallace: Yes, in 19..., my brother younger than me was a junior at Vincent High School, which I was already in college and finished, they had problems with cheerleaders. In 19, I believe it was '71, they called in the National Guard because they started a racial problem, no black cheerleaders on the football team that year. And that was the only problem I knew that we had in that area during that time.

Lanzing: So you don't remember any occasions of violence due to school integration?

Wallace: No. That was the only one, and I found out later that I don't think anyone went out for the cheerleading team. The following year the whole cheerleading team was all black.
[Laughter]

Lanzing: Did white and black children play together often growing up?

Wallace: When we was coming up, like I said we were farmers, and we had big farmers in the neighborhood, the Bakers, the kids. My father was one of the black farmers doing that, and we got along because we used to borrow equipment from each other. The kids, you know we got along 'cause we knew each other, but like I said, it was a small town. Everybody was trying to make it, and we didn't have time for that foolishness. Now 26 miles away, Birmingham, that's where all the problems coming, but like I said, we were just little farmers trying to make it, and we never really had any racial problems when I was coming up. You know, other than we might go down to the Dairy Queen and get into it with a guy about his car, and whose car the fastest or something, but other than that, we didn't have no problem.

Lanzing: So there was a big difference between the larger cities in Alabama?

Wallace: Oh, great big difference. Most people look at the South and look at states like Alabama and Mississippi, which had more problems than we did. But you have to look at the big cities, Birmingham, Mobile, Montgomery. They had problems, but like I said we were trying to make it in a small town. Everybody knew each other. Blacks and whites. Wasn't that foolishness. Everybody was trying to make it. People that did, like I said, my father just farmed on the side. But, you know, most people worked at the big plants. We had a steam plant and the paper mill, and they'll be one farmer that either worked there or they farmed. So, like I said, we didn't have that problem. But 24 miles away, we see it on the news, you know, in Birmingham.

Lanzing: Do you remember seeing it on the news?

Wallace: Oh, yes. My oldest brother was involved in some of it over in the Birmingham area. You know, he's old enough to travel and get called over there with some friends, and they be rioting and stuff. But when I was coming up, now, I went off to school in Montgomery. Two years, I was at Selma University. Two years prior to Martin Luther King walked across the Pettus Bridge, my oldest brother was down there. Now, he took a bus down there during that time. But just growing up, I didn't have it. During my college days, I seen a bunch of it, when I went off to school in Selma, Alabama and Montgomery.

Lanzing: Did you ever see any interracial couples?

Wallace: Coming up in our day, I saw the interracial couples probably in the early '70s when I was off at college. You know, they were dating, but coming up in our area, we didn't see that in the '60s.

Lanzing: Did it still surprise you in the '70s?

Wallace: Well, I take that back. We saw it in the '60s when someone from the North came down that was interracial. Matter of fact, my brother-in-law, now at that time, he was married to a white lady when I was still, I was in college at the time. But it mostly came from the North, you know at that time.

Lanzing: Were blacks forced to live in a certain area of your town?

Wallace: No.

Lanzing: Was that true in the bigger cities?

Wallace: Well, like I said, Birmingham area you still have those areas, like Inslet, Homewood, where you got certain areas people live in. You still got those areas in Montgomery which I go back and visit sometimes. But like I said, we coming up, my father had like 5 or 6 acres of land. My uncle, they still had 2 or 3 acres. You know, when we moved up there, we moved into that area, our neighbor, Johnny Tolsom was white, when we moved there. And then he went down, and he was a farmer. Like I said, you wouldn't even tell that his daughter, as a matter of fact, back then she was a couple years older than us, and we used to play together like crazy 'cause she'd come over on her bicycle, we'd ride down there, and there was nothing like Johnny Tolsom didn't want no black boys playing with his daughter. [?] Like I said, I don't think our mind was set for people in that area, they was, most of them was educated. My mother and father went off to school, and you know, like I said, I don't think they really were looking at that. Everybody was trying to make it in a little, small town in that time. That even though we hear it on the news, see it on the news, but we didn't have that problem.

Lanzing: Were there any common discriminatory practices at all that you remember?

Wallace: No, not during that time. Like I said, when we got up in school, you started, you know, seeing and hearing and seeing things. Your mind started changing, but like I said, when I was coming up as a teenager in high school, we didn't have it. We got off at school, that's when we started seeing the racial problems coming up. That's when things started getting involved when I was up at school in [?] and you know, problems happened in Montgomery. Stuff like that.

Lanzing: Did you have any problems matriculating into the university because of being black?

Wallace: No, 'cause I went to an all-black college.

Lanzing: Were you ever the victim of racism there?

Wallace: Yeah, we had a little, small town, which if I look back at it, I don't know whether

you, yeah, you could say it was racism, because the way things happen out here. I was stopped by a police officer in a little small town which is 7 or 8 miles away and kind of I felt like it was a little hassle because my car had broke down, and I was under trying to pull a [?] back through and he told me to get out of the car because he had stopped someone on down further. So, I got out. He already had brought his gun on me, and I felt that was kind of racial. Then after he seen what I was doing, when I turned my head, I let him see. He kind of wanted to shine his light to help me fix my car, but I kind of got a little-arrogant and told him, you know, I think he knew he was wrong at the time, it was wrong to do it, so. That was about the only incident. I really was upset at the time 'cause I think I was a freshman in college at that time. We still had the little towns around us, like Childersburg. A little bit bigger town. They had more police officers than we did, you know, little racial problems going on over there. But in [?] County, I seen people when they stop them and stuff.

Lanzing: As a child, did white kids ever pick on you?

Wallace: No. I was a pretty good size, so, at the time.

Lanzing: They were probably afraid?

Wallace: I didn't have no blacks picking on me. Like I said, just like I would name the families early, the Bakers, the kids of a white family that farmed, and the Donahues [?], they owned two stores down in town, Jack Donahue was a brother of [?] was the mayor. And their son, Donny, we were about the same age. He went to Vincent High, and like I said, we used to go down there and drive around with our cars, but we never had that problem. And we used to scrimmage football against [?], but we never played in a regular game. We used to scrimmage against in our school, but we never, we kind of knew each other. The one had grown up in town, and they played on the football team, and we kind of knew each other. Like I said, we'd get together some Saturdays and then joke and tease, but just going out fighting or racial fighting? No, we never had nothing like that. I think Donny's brother and my brother got into it over some rims on a car, but it wasn't no racial deals. He had bought some rims off somebody that stole the rims off my brother's car, and he sold them to this guy. He said he did, and the guy said he had got them, and they got into a little scuffle downtown one evening, but other than that, we never had no racial problems. Not at the time. The racial problems came up when I went off to college. Like I said, when I got to old big cities and seen the problems coming up.

Lanzing: What do you remember about the civil rights movement?

Wallace: I remember, like I said, the civil rights movement was big 20-some miles away. I remember that good. Bull Connor, [?] Birmingham, turning the dogs on the people. Like I said, I was in the teens then. My older brother was involved in that, which we didn't [?], but they was involved in, and that was a big thing in those big cities. Montgomery's only 70-some miles away, so I was around it, but not in my hometown. And then when I got up, I was involved in a bunch of it when I went off to college in the early '70s, late '60s. I went off to college in '68. And I

experienced a bunch of it during that time when you got those big cities. You know, you might go into a place, and you feel like you're not wanted at all. That stuff, but at that time, I think I had got to a point where we had, I was kind of arrogant at the time, and we didn't go for it, and it kind of falls down because they called in the National Guard in Alabama State also, and we was all marching at the time.

Lanzing: When you were in college, you participated in marches and protests?

Wallace: Oh, yes. Most of us was from some of the things that was going on on campus. And during that time, in Montgomery, where Rosa Parks started, all that started from, we had some little places downtown where they used to try to ban blacks. And I'd initiate protests. We used to go down and stand in front of the building and protest.

Lanzing: Do you remember seeing facilities that were marked whites only or coloreds only?

Wallace: Oh, yes. I was seen that up until about 15, 20 years ago. From the North Florida area all the way up to South Carolina, which at that time, I didn't even know it existed. Most of it, I was in Vicksburg, Mississippi in 1981, which I was living here. I was on my way to Dallas, Texas I had accepted a position there, and I stopped in Vicksburg, and I'll never forget that. I thought this stuff was over with. And they had [?] colored and white. I hadn't seen that word 'colored' in 20, 30 years. And I said, "Good grief Some areas are still living back in the doggone '40s and '50s. And I just kind of shook my head. I couldn't really believe it, but it's still going on now in some areas. You'd be surprised. If you travel, I mean you might not see the signs, but you can see, you know, they still have this mentality of separation and stuff.

Lanzing: What sorts of facilities were generally segregated?

Wallace: Your bathrooms and restaurants mostly.

Lanzing: Did you ever see any blacks attempt to use a facility that was marked as whites only?

Wallace: No, now in the 1966, '67, we got a Dairy Queen. Dairy Queen came to town in [?]. And I will tell you, the older you get, you look back on the stuff you do. Now they had never put a sign up coloreds only, whites only inside the Dairy Queen. But it was about six of us got together one Friday and went down to the Dairy Queen, and broke up in the Dairy Queen and sat down at the tables. Lady came and waited on us, and we got up and walked out. We didn't pay for it, but that mentality, we were thinking that that meant it was going on in our hometown, which it was.

Lanzing: Did you experience any racism going to college or in the workplace after college?

Wallace: I can say yes to that. When I graduated in 1972, I was called for an interview in Birmingham, AL at the Water Department, and I got a phone call at home. I had put in an application. During that time, George Wallace was the governor of Alabama. So, I went on to the interview, and I was standing there out there, and the lady said, "Yes, can I help you?" And I said, "Yes, I'm here for an interview." And she said, "Your name?" I said, "Art Wallace." And the first question came out, "You're Art Wallace?" And I said, "Yes, I am." And at that time, I was kind of radical. She went back in a door, opened the door, and I seen someone else peep out the door. So, I went into the interview, which they did the procedure, and we sat there, and the lady said, "Mr. Wallace, we have four more candidates that's qualified, and we gotta look over the applications." Now at that time, I kind of was, I said, "Were you expecting a white person, ma'am?" "Oh, no, no, no, no, no." I said, "Well, it was kind of odd since when I was called, it seemed like this job and your reception, the statement, 'You're Art Wallace' like they was looking for..." "Oh, no, no, no, no, no." I felt that was racist, which at the time, it was. Because like I said, I was called in like the job was there because I had sent in my resume and everything, and I think at that time, they was expecting to see a white person. And I felt that was racism. That's about the only one really stood out in my mind, and I felt like they was looking for a white instead of a black for that position.

Lanzing: Did you get the position?

Wallace: Oh, no.

Lanzing: So a white person ended up getting it?

Wallace: I never did follow up on it. When I left that office, I didn't even contact that office anymore. They didn't contact me. When she said she will get back in touch with me, you know, which I didn't. After I told her, "Were you expecting a white?" "Oh, no, no, no, no, no." I'm pretty sure that's what it was.

Lanzing: You mentioned George Wallace, and he is one of the most famous people from this era. What do you remember about him?

Wallace: He was one of the most famous people to you. Not to me.

Lanzing: Yes. And he's definitely in the history books now.

Wallace: Oh yeah. Matter of fact, he was on the stage when I graduated and handed me my certificate.

Lanzing: Really?

Wallace: Definitely was. He was. A bunch of people really doesn't know the background on George Wallace. George Wallace was raised up in Clay County. Clay County, Alabama.

George Wallace was raised up in an area, Clay County is one of the black belt counties, which is over 70% black at that time. George Wallace was raised up around black families and was raised up with them. George Wallace manipulated the blacks and the whites when he was a governor. If people know the history coming up, which I did, during the time when we used to get books. A long time ago, we used to get used books from the white school. George Wallace was fighting against all of this when he was there, but we always got everything the blacks asked for. People don't realize that. We had new books when I was in school. George Wallace was fighting to keep blacks out of the university. At the same time they got in there, George Wallace was doing things to the blacks, he was manipulating between the blacks and the whites. Now, he was a smart governor. I give him credit for that. I realized that when I got older, and I watched it. Matter of fact, I had been down to the governor's office when I was in college. I was probably [?] and he was kind of manipulative. If you notice, everything he was fighting against the blacks, the blacks got it. And I guess he told whites that didn't want it, he was trying to show them he was against it, but at the same time, we had new books and everything when I was off at school. We had new books, and it's kind of amazing, but people don't realize that, and he was raised up around blacks. Clay County. But when he got to be governor, I guess he had to play that role back in the '60s. But like I said, he was on stage in the wheelchair handing me my certificate when I graduated.

Lanzing: Do you remember the incident of the Arkansas kids in Little Rock? The six or eight black children walking into school and they were completely harassed the entire time. Do you remember seeing that on the news?

Wallace: Oh, yeah.

Lanzing: Did that make you feel anything about your area?

Wallace: Well, like I said, during that time, yeah, I seen that on the news. That's what probably still steamed the heat of radical stuff in our mind when we was coming up because we wasn't experiencing it in our neighborhood. And we were seeing this and we says, "Man," the first thing coming out of our mouths is "This better not happen here. We'll do this and that." You know, that's what I'm saying. We didn't experience it. We just saw it in other places. And at that time, when we was getting up in age when "Man, if they do that and we try to go to Vincent High, we'll turn...", you know and several years down the road, my brother and them, they didn't have no problem going. Like I said, only problem they had, they was upset 'cause there weren't no cheerleaders on the team. [Laughter]

Lanzing: When did you move to Florida?

Wallace: I moved to Florida in 1975.

Lanzing: Why did you move here?

Wallace: I graduated from college, teaching school in Alabama. My wife, well, my

girlfriend at the time, fiancée, she had a position down here, and I drove down with her that summer. She got the position. I put in applications .while I was here. And I ended up staying. Cancelled my contract in Alabama and came here. I worked for the Boys' Club.

Lanzing: Did you first come to Bradenton?

Wallace: Palmetto area, yeah. That's the only area we ever came to. She had a position in Palmetto back then, and we ended up living in Bradenton. We never lived in Palmetto though. We always lived here.

Lanzing: Did you notice any differences between Alabama and Florida in regards to racism?

Wallace: Not really because when I came here in '75 in this area, I didn't really experience that much.

Lanzing: Especially in Palmetto?

Wallace: That and the Bradenton area.

Lanzing: Is there anything that you would like to add?

Wallace: No, I just think that things trying to get better. We still have that problem going on. It's nothing like it was back in the '60s, but we still got the problem. We still have that line, and people just have to grow and get their mind steadfast. And you know, problems going to remain. You just have to be able to-help solving one of them. They are, and you know, sometimes you just, you can't overlook it, but you just shake your head and say, "Why people still got a mentality like they got?" You're still always gonna have that. Long as you have different human societies, you're still gonna have someone in each race, black, white, mix of whatever, gonna feel that mentality. That old-fashioned racial stuff back in their heads.

Lanzing: Do you think we've come a long way in last 30 years?

Wallace: We have came a long ways, a long ways.

Lanzing: Well, thank you very much for doing this interview.

Wallace: Why, you're quite welcome.

The End