



Cotton, who came out of slavery in Mexia, Texas. He stayed on. He was on this trout (?) plantation. Served on the state legislature after the Civil Rights, Civil War was over. And, that's where I was born.

Dulaney: Okay.

Cotton: Stayed there, stayed in a one, three-room school there. And, then when I moved to Dallas, my mother died when I was two years old, so my sister thought that she had a special thing. So, when she was dying, my mother she told my sister to take care of your little brother. And, so when she married, she wanted me to move with her and her husband.

Dulaney: Here in Dallas?

Cotton: Here in Dallas.

Dulaney: Okay, tell me about your education.

Cotton: Well, I graduated from Lincoln High School here in Dallas. Went to Phyllis Wheatley elementary school and Lincoln high school, and went to Prairie View. Decided after Prairie View to spend one summer in Michigan State, at, in East Lansing, Michigan. And, then by that time North Texas was admitting blacks to come there and so I spent the remainder of

my education at North Texas State.

Dulaney: Okay, so you got a Bachelor's at Prairie View and, what, a Master's at North Texas State.

Cotton: North Texas State.

Dulaney: Okay, what was your major?

Cotton: My major was History and Political Science at Prairie View and North Texas State, it was school administration.

Dulaney: Okay. Why did you decide to go into education?

Cotton: Well, if you were black you either went into the professions of law and Doctor or you went into education. In fact, TSU had opened up and they came up to Prairie View when I was, I guess, sophomore, junior, probably sophomore, to try to get me to come to their law school because I majored in Political Science.

Dulaney: You started with the school district, I guess in about 1957.

Cotton: Right.

Dulaney: How did you get, how did you get your first job there?

Cotton: I got my first job in Bryant, Texas. I couldn't get interviewed in Dallas. I'd come home. I didn't know how to interview, so I waited until I came home, in

the summer, after I graduated from college and, I couldn't get an interview. They said they had all the teachers they needed. And, so my second year in Bryant, I spent two years in Bryant, Texas, in the spring of that year, I came up here and got an interview. And, I wasn't hired then. I went to Michigan State and they called me, and I hadn't taken the National Teacher's exam, so he wouldn't hire me then. So, I came back and stayed a week after school opened, that second year in Bryant, that third year in Bryant, he called me and offered me a job. So, I had to go up and talk to the Superintendent and tell him that I wanted to leave. And, he first said he wasn't going to release me because I had a contract and then the principal persuaded him to let me go. So, I came to Dallas in September the 30<sup>th</sup> of 1957.

Dulaney: Where did you work at first? What school?

Cotton: Colonial, which is now Martin Luther King.

Dulaney: What did you teach?

Cotton: I taught Language Arts and Social Studies. Dallas in the elementary schools, at that time, they had what they called broad fields. So you taught Language Arts, Social Studies; and then in Math, Science and those others, they had specialties for the upper

grades.

Dulaney: How long were you at Colonial?

Cotton: I was there until 1964.

Dulaney: And, what school did you go to then?

Cotton: I became principal of the N.B. Lamar School, which is now Winn Friday.

Dulaney: Okay. Tell us about going to South Oak Cliff. How did that happen and why, because that was something sort of in advance of the 1971 school desegregation case so, what happened?

Cotton: That was a...Dallas started desegregating long before then...

Dulaney: Okay...

Cotton: It started out with a grade a year plan, somewhere in the sixties. And then in 1965, it had all elementary schools had to be desegregated. The plan was in 1965 we were going to desegregate the elementary schools. They were going to change the boundaries. If white students, whatever, if you lived in that district, that's where you went to school. Prior to that, they had a dual attendance zone. And then in 1965, they had one attendance zone. In 1966, it desegregated its Junior high schools. 1967 it was the high schools. So in 1967, I went to,

from Lamar, I went to Seagoville as principal of a high school in Seagoville, a black high school in Seagoville which was in the district. So in 1967, it was going to desegregate all of the high schools. And so, I went from being principal of the Benjamin Banner high school to the South Oak Cliff high school as their assistant principal.

Dulaney: Well, tell us about the experience. What was it like being an, the first African American vice principal, assistant principal at a white school?

Cotton: Well, they knew they were going to get black students there that year, because the area around it was in transition from being an all-white neighborhood to selling to African-Americans. And so, they were going to get a significant number of black students from Roosevelt high school. It wasn't something I looked forward to. Giving an example, they...their drill team was called the Golden Debs. And they, I found out later on they had a retirement party for the Golden Debs because they didn't think that the new students that were going to come over would live up to the standards that the Golden Debs had in this, in this district.

Dulaney: But, what, what happened? You said retirement party

do you mean they just cut, cut out that entire program.

Cotton: They didn't cut out the program. They retired it. They...the sponsor of that program went to another high school. And the young ladies that were elected to be officers in it, stayed there. And, the African American Students were allowed to participate in the new drill team. And, they changed the name to the pivoteers, which they still have the name as pivoteers, rather than the Golden Debs.

Dulaney: Okay. What were some of the other experiences you had their as Vice-principal?

Cotton: Well, one of the things is, what Dr. White said when he sent me out there, was that you have to earn the people's respect. That he couldn't give me respect, we had to earn the people's respect; and how you treated people. One of the things I decided to do with the white principal, the other white assistant...there was two assistant principals. I was one of them and they had a different one. About two or three weeks after I got there, when school started, they had moved the assistant principal that had been there for a while and made him a principal, took one of the white teacher's and he became the

principal, assistant principal. And, so we decided to handle all discipline together, rather than separately. What we began to decide on, was that the blacks...Teachers would send the black students to me, and send the white students to him. And so, we decided that we'd handle it together so, it wouldn't be any, any division in terms of how that was going to be handled. We were asked to, they were expecting some difficulties, so the assistant principals were asked to ride the busses in terms of band busses and those kind of busses when we go on trips; if we were going to play somebody we would ride busses - activities. We didn't have any dances that first year. You can imagine why. We had no social dances; the kind of things they normally had. They didn't have any of those.

Dulaney: Were there any difficulties? You mentioned they were expecting some, were there any that took place.

Cotton: I guess the most trying time was the very first day of school because, and from the side of Oak Cliff it's three lanes, going both ways. And, when school turned out cars were parked out there, it was so deep that you couldn't, couldn't let traffic by. And, so we made a decision, at least I did, made a



decision, of course the principal didn't come out and to participate in discipline. He didn't participate in the discipline of any of the kids; black or white or Hispanic.

Dulaney: Okay.

Cotton: To get them to not get out of the cars was...we told them to get back in the cars. And we also had, like when we desegregated M.B. Lamar and I was there, a policeman came by and said he was assigned to that area, and gave us a special number to call if we had any difficulties, we could call that and he would respond quickly. He didn't come in the school, but he was there if we had any difficulties.

Dulaney: Okay. How long were you at South Oak Cliff?

Cotton: Four years.

Dulaney: Four years, where did you go from there?

Cotton: I went to the school administration building as director of elementary operations. There were four of us as directors of elementary operations. I had the Oak Cliff schools.

Dulaney: Why were you picked to do that job? You know, John Leslie Patton had been, I guess the first African-American administrator, of course when he passed, was he replaced by an African-American or were you

the first to come in after him?

Cotton: No, Dr. Estes had become superintendent in 1969. I believe it was 1969 or 1970. 1969. And he was desegregating. He brought in the first African American, was Otto N. Friday. And, Otto had been the principal of Lincoln high school and had been principal of a number of schools. And, J. Leslie Patton had also been brought in to serve out his last years in the personnel office.

Dulaney: So, why did they pick you in 1971? I'm assuming that this is when you went to the district office?

Cotton: Yes, I wasn't the only one. There was about 5 or 6 that was brought in, in 1971.

Dulaney: And, what did you do at the District office specifically?

Cotton: You were to visit those schools, see if there were any problems, make recommendation on any changes, anything that needed to be made. You were also in charge of their budget; in other words, you approved the things that come from that budget. And, supposedly see that instruction took place.

Dulaney: Okay. How did desegregation, or integration, affect your job?

Cotton: Well, I found out that they did things that we, as,

as all black did not do.

Dulaney: Okay.

Cotton: As an example, United Way, when we were all black; black principals, black teachers -- gave one day's pay to the United Way. And the principals, black principals, saw that you gave one day's pay 'cause they had your salary and they calculate what one day's pay would be. When I went to South Oak Cliff, that wasn't the case. There were a lot of teachers who didn't give at all and one day's pay was never emphasized.

Dulaney: Okay. Any other things though in terms of how desegregation affected the way, you as an administrator, you as a teacher, did your job?

Cotton: When we had convocation, when we were all black, that was a real dress-up affair.

Dulaney: Okay.

Cotton: We would all come out in our finest. Ladies had on their hats and purses, high heels and everything -- 'cause we had convocation separately. They had it at State Fair Music Hall. We had ours, when I was coming up, at James Madison. That stopped before the integration came. Dr. White stopped that and started it down to the convention center. And, we found out

then, they weren't dressed at all like that. They didn't come in their Sunday best.

Dulaney: I'm going to ask you a broad question now. You think about it. You served under, what, five superintendents.

Cotton: Yes.

Dulaney: Out of those five, which one do you think did the best job dealing with the issue of desegregation in the Dallas Independent School District?

Cotton: Nolan Estes.

Dulaney: Why Nolan Estes?

Cotton: Nolan Estes was the one that did, that integrated, Central Office. As an example, prior to him, we had a coffee bar at the administration building, I think they still do, and they, you were at the coffee bar on your breaks. You were going down there; at that time, we had to pick up our mail twice a week. We drove down there to pick up our mail -- it wasn't delivered to us. And, we couldn't go to the coffee bar. When he came along, he said you go to the coffee bar. He wanted to desegregate the, where we used to have our principal's meeting once a month. Black principals, by and large, sat together. I'd say, 98-99% of us sat together in one side of the auditorium.

When I went in to be as a first year principal, the veteran's told me where to sit. You know, you saw it, and you sat over there. And, you'd usually sit next to the person that you made principal under.

Dulaney: But, did Dr. Nolan Estes change that...

Cotton: Well, he came down over there and stood where the black principals usually sat. Without announcing it, said, don't sit here, go over there. Don't sit here, go some other place, as a way of desegregating.

Dulaney: How did the white principals react to his move to desegregate the principal's meeting?

Cotton: Well, they knew changes were coming. And, we got assignments like no other. For example, first, Otto Friday, when he first went down there in charge of black schools. He was the first assistant superintendent. He was in charge of black schools. The schools I was in charge of Otto became assistant superintendent. So, Otto was in charge of schools, all elementary schools, not just the black schools.

Dulaney: Right. Okay. Okay. Tell me about the case under Linus Wright. Where the director of facilities was charged with embezzling funds and taking kick-backs. And, of course you were one of the persons who testified against him. How did you get involved in that case?

Cotton: Well, he reported to me. Facilities was an area that had very few minorities in. Period. In that office, in the wing of the building, there weren't any people of color. Not even a secretary. The only person he was in charge of that was black was the person in charge of custodians.

Dulaney: Okay... and...

Cotton: And, that case was one that people have a way of, even though they have to report to you, sometimes go around you. And, the program started before Nolan Estes left, it was that you would start construction without having complete plans. You would have it drawn up, completed, and then you bid it, he said, over cost, I'll charge this percentage over cost. And, so, the allegation was is that he was taking kick-backs from architects and from contractors. The case ruled he was not found guilty simply, because the fact is they couldn't produce some of the evidence they had, that they had.

Dulaney: Okay. Was he able to return back to the district?

Cotton: No, he was terminated. He got, he was terminated and due process was not filed by the superintendent.

Dulaney: Okay.

Cotton: According to the judge.

Dulaney: Okay. I'll give this broader question. You know, you sort of survived, you also survived five superintendents. How were you able to do that? Because normally, you know, a new superintendent come in and he, or she, will sort of clean house and put his or her people in place, but you were there consistently from 1971 'til your retirement. You were able to stay in administration.

Cotton: Well, when I became associate superintendent in 1974-1975, I did not have that same span of control; responsibility when I left in 2000. Superintendents like to have about three people who he always like to have with him. That's personnel, finance, and PR -- Public Relations. Those three people, with other people you can survive with internal people, but those people are key to your survival as a superintendent.

Dulaney: Okay.

Cotton: So when, for instance, things were moved, it was personnel. Some (?) wanted personnel down there. The other thing is somebody wanted finance; money, 'cause if the budget, finances, don't go correctly, you in trouble. And, somebody who had their eyes on PR, got to have that person speaking for you. And,

superintendents kept things, they just had to start reporting to him, rather than to me. When I was associate superintendent, before started out there, I wanted two associate superintendents. And, that got to be larger depends on who was there. And that didn't necessarily relate to race, it related to he wanted somebody that he trusted.

Dulaney: But you survived. So, each of the new superintendents that came, again some who obviously didn't know you, they kept you and as an assistant or associate superintendent, for, again you were there for 28-29 years basically. And, again, are you saying that all of the ones who came in said, "well, I heard about Mr. Cotton and he's a good man and does a good job."

Cotton: No, I kept the title, but sometimes they removed departments from under you.

Dulaney: But, they didn't remove you.

Cotton: Didn't remove me.

Dulaney: Okay.

Cotton: I thought some of them wanted to...[chuckles]

Dulaney: Like who?

Cotton: [Laughs]

Dulaney: [Chuckles]

Cotton: Oh, I imagine all of them did, even, the last one.



When I retired under Rojas, but I reported to another man. I'm trying to think of his name now. Anyway, he participated in a trial. He left here and went to Detroit. And, the man I reported to, went to Detroit and got some difficulties for what he did here.

Dulaney: Okay. Talk about some of the things you have done in the community. You know, I saw you were in the committee to do the Joseph Lockridge scholarship. How did you get involved in that?

Cotton: Well, I was principal of South Oak Cliff when that happened and some of my students went to Golden gate where Joseph Lockridge was a member or his Dad was a member. And, so, if I wanted them to get a scholarship, you want to be there so you can have a hand in it. So that was a little time to invest for the benefit of your students. For a few students. They were going to give that scholarship to somebody who was a member of that church, the Joseph Lockridge Scholarship, and that's why Joseph Lockridge was a member.

Dulaney: Okay.

Cotton: And, so that worked out pretty good.

Dulaney: Okay. What were some of the other things you were involved in, in the community?

Cotton: Not many.

Dulaney: Were you a member of the NAACP, the SCLC, the Urban League or any of those organizations?

Cotton: I was member of the NAACP.

Dulaney: Okay. When did you join?

Cotton: I joined after I was an adult.

Dulaney: Okay.

Cotton: You remember, when I was teaching, and we desegregated, the NAACP was active. Teachers couldn't openly join NAACP.

Dulaney: Okay. They had to send their money in a way that it didn't identify you as a teacher in DISD and it couldn't show your name. 'Cause there was some legal trying to get the NAACP to show its membership rooster and the issue was that you couldn't do that.

Cotton: So, how long were you in the NAACP?

Dulaney: About 10 years or so.

Cotton: Okay, okay, alright. Dr. Roberts, have any questions for Mr. Cotton?

Roberts: I don't want to duplicate what you all have got, but I would be interested in hearing about the African American administrators that came to Central Staff. And, I intended to bring a document but I didn't. Mrs. Lang gave me a copy of the songbook that was

used at Principal's meetings and it had 'Old Black Joe' in it, so I wanted you to go back that far, and talk about how the principal's sat in the auditorium, where they parked when they had to come to the Administration building over the years, restroom facilities.

Cotton: Well, let's talk about the song, for the first one. The...Dr. White had a group that would sing, a group of principal's that would sing. There were few black principal's who would sing. One of them, he was head of the credit union for, for blacks in the DISD, and he would lead the songs. And, he would lead the song "Old Black Joe." We just sat there. Dr. Patton once said in a speech he made, that he didn't understand how anyone could say hero, but could not say Negro. That was aimed at the then superintendent of schools who would say Negro. And, he would say that he didn't understand that. He said that in front of all the principals. But they would sing old songs, ones that were associated with blacks. That they would sing in black churches, but we didn't sing that in my church where I was a member of; still a member of that same church. But, Old Black Joe. We come from a different school in my church. But,

anyway, I told him about the fact that we sat in the auditorium on the right hand side; a few sat in the middle close to the right hand side. And we always sat next to, tried to sit next to, the person that we made principal of, And, Dr. White, somewhere in the 1950s started having tests. National, it was a national test, that we would take tests in order to become principal. That's how we got identified as a potential administrator. In that you took a test, and you had to score on that test to be a principal. Now, when he first started that he already had black principals. And, it didn't affect them at all, but those who came in at the time I was, I was encourage to take the test by my principal, C. Eldon Howard. And, I guess I had been here two or three years. I guess about two years and he suggested I take the test. The year that I served in personnel I had a chance to look at my file. And, I had a chance to look at the letter he wrote. [Chuckles] Should have copied it, but I didn't. In the letter he wrote, he was saying that he thought I was a fine man, he thought I was a fine principal, but I wasn't ready. [Laughs] He was not in the district at that time. I didn't never say anything to him, but that's what he

said about me.

Dulaney: [Chuckles]

Cotton: [Laughs] At any rate, so I stayed at Colonnial longer than I should have 'cause that biased recommendation.

Roberts: You talked about the individuals that happened to enjoy some of the luxuries in life like driving Cadillacs.

Cotton: No, he didn't ask about that.

Roberts: Yeah. Tell us about that.

Cotton: Some of the experienced, mostly the experienced principals, had Cadillacs. But they park, when they park in the parking lot, they'd park a block or two away, so that, as if, they...The superintendent didn't know what type of car they were driving, so they'd walk the one or two blocks from the Administration building to their Cadillac -- rather than have it, rather than drive it up there.

Roberts: What about Part time work (??)?

Dulaney: No, no wait a minute...

Roberts: Okay.

Dulaney: Why? I know the answer, but for the record, why would they park their Cadillacs two blocks from the

administration building?

Cotton: [Takes a deep breath and chuckles softly]

Dulaney: For posterity here...

Cotton: They'd park it because they thought they'd lose their job. You know, Dallas at that time, Dr. Roberts is well aware of this, had to live in the school district, within the boundaries of the school district if you were an administrator and your children had to go to Dallas public schools. There was some people that made principal when I did that lived in Hamilton Park, which is in the Richardson school district, it's in Dallas, but in the Richardson school district. And they had to move in, they got appointed in June and they had to be in a new house come September. That's when we started school traditionally, by September, and their kids had to be in Dallas schools. So they had between, I guess, the last of May 'til September, you had have moved.

Roberts: What about part time employment? Could principal's work as waiters in that era, if they got a part time job as a waiter?

Cotton: No, I checked, he didn't say this. I tagged groceries at Tom Thumb as a teacher, after school and on

weekends 'cause I had a house full of kids. And, so, I had to stop that employment. It was well-known that I was advised that that was not appropriate.

Dulaney: For a principal?

Cotton: To a principal.

Dulaney: Wow.

Cotton: Even though you didn't make that much money as a principal.

Roberts: What about some of the principals that worked part time as waiters, were they allowed to do that?

Cotton: They were not allowed to do that. What they would do would be, not make it public that they were doing that kind of work.

Roberts: Did you talk to him about the transition at South Oak Cliff high school?

Dulaney: Yes, yes, we talked about that, yeah. You retired in 2000, and the question was, were you forced out? In fact, 387 employees left in 2000, and the question was, not only you, was, but did you all leave because Superintendent Rojas was coming in and wanted to clean house?

Cotton: Rojas had been there for a year. In fact, I got a raise under Rojas. In fact, it has helped my retirement significantly. [Chuckles]

Dulaney: Okay.

Cotton: The three...In the teacher retirement system, in fact the three best years are averaged. And so, that was the best year I had under Rojas, in terms of salary.

Dulaney: Okay. So, so, the speculation because all of y'all left because of him is not true -- at least for you.

Cotton: No, not for me. I always told people who came, you leave when you are ready, not when they want you to leave. I'm not saying they didn't want me to leave. I don't know that.

Dulaney: Yeah.

Cotton: There had been some talk in the past that I was targeted, I was on a list, all this. But I just say, my last year was my best year in terms of salary in the DISD.

Dulaney: Okay. I don't have any more questions. Anything you want to add.

Cotton: No.

Dulaney: Well hope I haven't sounded like a prosecutor cross-examining at all.

Cotton: No.

Dulaney: But, thank you very much for coming out and doing this and as I said we will be producing a DVD. And,



you get a copy of this one.

Cotton: You want these back.

Dulaney: Yes, sir. Alright.

Cotton: Can I get a copy of the first one?

Dulaney: In fact, you want then, you can actually have them.

Cotton: Okay.

Dulaney: Okay. I guess one last thing, how has it felt giving all the honors you gotten, you know in 2009 they named the William H. Cotton service center after you and then, being inducted into the Hall of Fame, so how does it feel now to be recognized for all of your work?

Cotton: I don't think I've done anything to be recognized like I have.

Dulaney: Okay.

Cotton: I thought I was just doing my job. I knew Dr. Roberts when I went to Seagoville as principal. He was down there. A real young man, wasn't even married.  
[Chuckles]

Dulaney: [Chuckles]

Cotton: In fact, it's a memorable year for me. In the fact that I had always wanted a son and my son was born in January down there. I also remember when he was born my wife had a stroke. So, when I went to South

Oak Cliff, you know I had to hire somebody to look after my wife and meet these challenges. So when a young man wanted to challenge me once, after that first day, I turned to him: I can't lose. [Chuckles]

Dulaney: Yeah, yes...

Cotton: I got too much baggage to lose and I have to give you the first swing.

Roberts: [Laughs]

Dulaney: [Agrees]

Cotton: Because the man will fire me if I lose.

Dulaney: [Agrees]

Cotton: Probably fire me for fighting. [Chuckles]

Dulaney: [Chuckles]

Cotton: What you are laughing about? If you are going to have a fight with somebody, you think about what do they have to lose.

Dulaney: Yeah, yes. Alright.

Cotton: And, I couldn't lose. Thank you.

Dulaney: Sure.

Cotton: I had this from the *Times Herald*, but I didn't have one from the *Morning News*.

Dulaney: Okay.

Cotton: In 1967.

Roberts: Mr. Cotton, we do need to get this from you. This is

allowing them to have possession of the tape.

[End of interview]