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Interview with
CATHERINE BELL
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Oral History Collection

Catherine Bell

Interviewer: Richard Byrd

Date of Interview: December 12, 1987

Place of Interview: Denton, Texas

Mr. Byrd: This is Richard Byrd interviewing Mrs. Catherine Bell for the North Texas State University Oral History Collection. The interview is taking place on December 12, 1987, in Denton, Texas. I'm interviewing Mrs. Bell in order to obtain her recollections concerning the Denton Christian Women's Interracial Fellowship.

Mrs. Bell, did I get the name of that organization correct?

Mrs. Bell: Yes, you did.

Mr. Byrd: I have had two or three different titles. First of all, Mrs. Bell, would you tell a little bit about your background--where you were born and the schools you attended?

Mrs. Bell: I was born in Clarksville. It's down below Paris and Texarkana. After high school there, I married my high school sweetheart (chuckle). We had one son.

Then in 1959 we decided to move to Denton. So we came here, and we've been here ever since. I have worked at the Denton State School. I worked there for eight-and-a-half years. I'm going on my eighteenth year with the Denton Independent School District. I'm employed with the

Denton Independent School District.

Byrd: Okay, so you moved to Denton in 1959.

Bell: Right.

Byrd: Before you had come to Denton, had you lived in a segregated neighborhood?

Bell: Yes, I had. At Clarksville I lived across the railroad tracks. I went to an all-black school. The thing was, you know, we lived on one side, and they lived on the other side.

Byrd: Well, when you were growing up, did white children and black children play together, or was it totally segregated.

Bell: Well, if I can remember, my brothers had white friends. My sister and I didn't.

Byrd: Was the same kind of situation prevalent here in Denton when you came here as it had been in Clarksville?

Bell: Yes, it was. I didn't fight with it a lot when I came here. When we came here, we had a hard time trying to find somewhere to live, so we lived in this small duplex. See, when we came here, I think students from TWU and North Texas and most of the college students lived off-campus, so it was kind of hard to find a place to live.

Byrd: Was it because there were so many students competing for housing?

Bell: I guess so. My husband came first, so he left my son and I. We stayed in Clarksville until he could find a place to live.

He was here about three weeks, and then we found a house with just three rooms--one bedroom and living room and a kitchen. I'd never had this experience before, and we had to share a bathroom with another family. I can recall that. It wasn't a good feeling to do that. It was so unsanitary and all of that. We had to share a bathroom.

Byrd: How about the educational facilities? Were they segregated in Denton as well?

Bell: When we came here, yes, they were.

Byrd: So the school situation in terms of integration was pretty much the same in Denton as it had been in Clarksville?

Bell: Yes. Yes, it was. They were all segregated. I lived two blocks from the high school.

Byrd: Was this Fred Moore High School?

Bell: Fred Moore. I never dreamed...like I said, I came from another place, Clarksville. But my son went there for one year, and that's when he was in the first grade. Then he went to an integrated school--Stonewall Jackson.

Byrd: Now what year was this?

Bell: Let's see. We came here in 1959, so I would say it was in 1965. Between 1964 and 1965.

Byrd: So that was right as schools had integrated?

Bell: Right. He went there in 1965; he went for one year. Then he went to an integrated school from his second grade up until he finished high school.

Byrd: You were speaking a moment ago about how you had difficulty finding housing. Did you perceive any kind of policy on lenders or renters or sellers?

Bell: My sister-in-law was living here, so she knew the man who owned the house or the duplex where we was going to stay. She was the one who helped us get housing. We didn't sign anything; it was just on her recommendation, I'd say.

Byrd: In the city of Denton, how did you think that blacks and whites were getting along together?

Bell: It was a real strange thing. I came from a much smaller town than this town--very small. I noticed that there was no movie theater, and there had been some that I had always been used to going to on Saturday. There's something else I noticed that they didn't have, but I can't recall right now. But it was very strange. It was very strange, also, because the social life was so much different from where I came from.

Byrd: Okay, how did you find out about this women's group, the Denton Women's Christian Interracial Fellowship?

Bell: I was a member at Pleasant Grove Baptist Church, and Mrs. P.C. Hill and a couple more women--I think there was about four or five of them--asked me if I would attend this one that they had. So I did.

Byrd: When you went, was this the first or second meeting?

Bell: This was the second one that I attended.

Byrd: And where was that held?

Bell: Oh, let's see. I can't recall right now. I want to say it was at Pleasant Grove Baptist Church. No, I think we had it in someone's home. I can't recall back that far, but I remember going to the second one.

Byrd: Would you describe that meeting for me? Who all was there? What took place?

Bell: Well, it wasn't strange to me because I have always been used to people of another race, you know. I had always been in different homes before I came here. My mom was a maid, and so I had an opportunity to go to different homes and get acquainted with different people. When we started getting together, it was kind of strange to note that we all are people, you know. I think we kind of hesitated to open up to one another. We were trying to seek one another out.

Byrd: I've heard it suggested that maybe some of the black women were suspicious of the white women, like, "What do they want to do with this group?"

Bell: Okay, "What are you asking of all of us? What do you want with us?" you know. Like I say, it was kind of strained because I noticed for some reason that we were kind of uncomfortable. Yet we realized that they came from all parts of the United States.

Byrd: Also, there were some out-of-town folks or not native Dentonites,

I guess.

Bell: Right. They were inspired by "Hey, let's join this group and see." All during the years, some of us have kept in close contact with one another. Euline Brock and I are very close friends..

Byrd: Well, at your meeting was there a set agenda?

Bell: No, we kind of opened up with...it's a funny thing. I'm sure that this has always been true from generation to generation. The blacks just kind of sat together. I never shall forget Trudy Foster, Ann Barnett, and Katherine McGuire. They started to make sure that we'd have a black, white, black, white. Ann and I have been friends, too.

Byrd: Well, were there officers or leadership in this group?

Bell: Yes. It was Mrs. Hill, and there was someone else. But I can recall Mrs. Hill and Ann Barnett. It was a black, white, black and white. Both races had the same number attending. There wasn't what you would call a chairman.

Byrd: Okay, what kind of activities did the group engage in?

Bell: One of the things we'd do was have a picnic. Then we would make sure that all the children would get to know one another. Also, in December I always think about this. I think it was maybe the second week in December when we would go up to the United Methodist Church, and we had a big dinner, covered dish; and Katherine McGuire's husband would always furnish the music and everything. The black

women would make sure that our husbands would be there, too.

Byrd: Were the husbands generally supportive?

Bell: Yes, they were. They really were. I remember that Paul Young really inspired me. He used to be at Trinity Presbyterian, and I used to work for him once a week. He really inspired me in joining and taking part in this group.

Byrd: Can you describe some of the other activities? I've heard tell from some folks that the group had gotten involved in community projects.

Bell: Yes, we did. When we came here, you had to park about three miles away when it rained because it would be so bad. I never shall forget that I finally had to buy me some overshoes (chuckle) in order to walk into the yard. So one Sunday afternoon, this particular group all got together. We all got together, and we just started walking the streets.

Byrd: Now this is prior to the streets being paved?

Bell: Unpaved, yes. Trudy Foster was one of our real big supporters. She really did most of the work on this.

Byrd: How did you folks go about putting pressure on the power structure or whatever to get the streets paved?

Bell: It really worked. We kept at it, and we kept working with them. We really talked with the people. We asked them if they'd be willing to pay "X" amount of money in order to have paved streets.

Byrd: You mean, the individual homeowners or the landlords?

Bell: Right. If you'll notice, there were some who did not pay. It was not something that was required of them to do over in this part of town. Southeast Denton was the "unknown." It was unclaimed by the city of Denton (chuckle). So we were surprised to know there was lots of people who were willing to pay to do this.

Byrd: Are you talking about raising contributions?

Bell: No, the homeowners would donate, I think, six feet or something.

Byrd: Oh, so they donated the land for the right-of-way.

Bell: Right, to get the right-of-way paved.

Byrd: Did you bring any political action before the city council or town fathers?

Bell: We did. We had a good supporter, but I can't think of her first name. I do remember her last name--[Lillian] Miller. She was a good supporter of the group, and she was on the city council. I'm trying to think of who else. You know, after they heard of this group, you'd be surprised that lots of people just came in and joined.

Byrd: It was well-publicized--the group's activities.

Bell: Yes, we really did. We publicized. Not only did we do that, but we had also some social activities. We would go out and meet and things. We really worked in this community --to bring this community up--because southeast Denton was so far behind.

Also, when we integrated, there was some buses that came. Pleasant Grove Baptist had one. There was different churches that donated for the gas and drivers. So this was to get the blacks back and forth to school.

Byrd: So this is voluntary, then?

Bell: This is voluntary. Our children could go to the white schools, but they would not furnish transportation.

Byrd: Would the school board volunteer the buses, or were these church buses?

Bell: No, it was a church-sponsored thing that would do this. I know that when my child went to Stonewall Jackson, I was in a carpool with people in the neighborhood. We would carpool to make sure that our children would have a way to school.

Byrd: It was my understanding, from the reading I've done, that there was controversy between paving the streets and urban renewal at about the same time.

Bell: Right. I can remember urban renewal. The city didn't want urban renewal to come in here. There was so many blacks who were against it, and I can understand, you know, because so many of us during that time had not heard of that. One time they brought a bus. They got a bus, and we went somewhere on the other side of Dallas to look around. It was impressive, but I agreed with the homeowners, that the city of Denton had money available for this area, and it had never been used. We did not know anything because we did

not have a representative to represent us on the city council.

Byrd: Okay, did you go on the tour in Dallas?

Bell: Yes, I did.

Byrd: What were your impressions?

Bell: It was impressive to a certain extent, and it was not impressive to a certain extent.

Byrd: What were they doing in Dallas that didn't impress you?

Bell: I don't know. I guess it was because of the background I came from. I just wasn't so keen on this idea. They did not make it clear to us. They just said, "Look here. This is what urban renewal can do for you."

Byrd: This is the residents? Was it only in southeast Denton that they were talking about?

Bell: Right, over here in southeast Denton. We weren't too receptive to it, and I can understand now. Now I can understand.

Byrd: Okay, you've talked about your response to that? How were the responses maybe of some of the other black ladies and the white ladies in the group, too, about urban renewal proposal?

Bell: How did they feel?

Byrd: Yes.

Bell: Well, some of the blacks in town that I talked with were totally against it. Well, we had just bought our home here, and so it wouldn't help me--urban renewal. But some of the

old people just felt this way about urban renewal: "If I don't pay, they're going to come in and take my home."

Byrd: So then were you more agreeable for the streets, it appears. The paving of the streets would take precedence over urban renewal.

Bell: Right.

Byrd: How long was the project going on to work with the group and through the officials to get the streets paved?

Bell: How long did we work? We worked a long time. We did it for quite a long time--many months--in order to get them to hear us.

Byrd: You suggested awhile ago that the group went out, I guess, to eat and to restaurants. How was a mixed group received in Denton at that time?

Bell: Well, we were waited on. They waited on us politely and everything. One of the strange things is that my son and I--when he was small--everytime that we would hear of a new place opening up, he and I would go. I would take him to make sure that he was going to be served. I just had that feeling in me, and I wanted him to realize that he had a right to be served and that he had a right like anyone else had.

Byrd: How did the restaurant owners or whatever respond? I recall reading during that time that there were some outbreaks of opposition.

Bell: Oh, yes. I never shall forget. There was one who was on Austin Street. I think his name was Bear or Barr. Anyway, he said, "If the government says so, I will do it, but I don't want to." And it wasn't too long before he was out of business. Then he was sick, and he lingered on for a long time. I remember this Ju-cy Pig that used to be here. There were some blacks that went in there to be served, and they refused to serve them. The helpers in the kitchen were all black, and they just walked out: "Hey if I'm going to cook these meals, why can't my people eat it?"

Byrd: That was in the Ju-cy Pig?

Bell: Right. I can remember that.

Byrd: I recall having heard something about someone who had printed up two menus. I don't recall the restaurant, but it had a different price scale for whites and blacks. Was that that restaurant, or was that another one?

Bell: I don't recall, but I did hear about it.

Byrd: Well, how did working within the group to integrate places of public accommodations help?

Bell: Okay, after we had felt them out and felt like we could have trust in them, we began to open up about some things that had happened to us.

Byrd: In the group?

Bell: In the group. And they would just go in and investigate it.

Byrd: Well, that kind of determined your agenda.

Bell: Right.

Byrd: Well, were there other issues? How about political participation--voting, registration?

Bell: Okay, those were some of the things we did. We encouraged lots of people in this area--in our area--to vote. We walked the streets, and we encouraged them to vote. There were some who did and some who didn't.

Byrd: Was it a partisan group or bipartisan?

Bell: It was bipartisan. Then I never shall forget. It's a strange thing, and it still goes on. One of the things that I highly resent--I really do--is that down here, when we are having church, here comes a particular person, a candidate, who would come in on Sunday morning and want to give a speech.

Byrd: A speech from the pulpit?

Bell: From the floor. We don't believe in going to the pulpit. You have to be ordained. I think that, hey, this should be done another way. I just resent that. I just kept wondering how many whites would go into these white churches and do that. But I personally highly resent that. I think that if you are there to go to church, you go to church. If you are a candidate, you get with someone and have someone set up a tea or something, a caucus or something, so you can meet the people.

Byrd: You were talking about the groups and meetings. Did these work from house to house?

Bell: Oh, yes, I remember, like I said, we started very small. They used to come here once a month, and we would meet. We wasn't particular about whose houses we would go in. We would meet; we would serve; we would sit around and enjoy one another.

Byrd: You said something earlier that some of the black ladies were somewhat suspicious of the white ladies.

Bell: Yes, because they felt like...they were always saying, "What do you want? Why are you prying into our lives? What are you going to do to us?"

Byrd: When the black women, maybe as a group or whatever, were going over to a white lady's house, was there a response, maybe, from the neighbors?

Bell: How did they feel about us?

Byrd: Yes.

Bell: Well, it was okay. Some of the blacks said, "Well I'm not going into her house as a maid." (chuckle) "I'm going to her house because she asked me, and I'm going to be her friend." There was some resentment, you know.

Byrd: How about from the other race? How about them coming back, when, say, the whites would come over to the black lady's house.

Bell: Well, it's a funny thing. I'm sure they was surprised,

when they came into some blacks' homes, to know that we do keep our homes clean, and we are very proud of our homes.

Byrd: How about from the neighborhood--when a group of white women would come into someone's home?

Bell: Well, when they used to come over here, one or two would ask me what was going on, and I told them, and I asked them to come join us. They said, "Well, I don't want to have anything to do with them. They'll stab you in the back." So they never did take part, I had some of my neighbors questioning me about: "Why are they coming over to your house? Why are you letting them?"

Byrd: I see. Maybe there was a little bit of suspicion on both sides. That's the feeling I'm getting here.

Bell: Right. Some resistance was present on both sides.

Byrd: How about the women's children in the organization?

Bell: One of the things is that our children kept a really close relationship with one another. We had a picnic. We would have a picnic during the summer, and this is where entire families would get to meet one another. Our children got acquainted with one another, so when they would go back to school, they would know, you know, who they were. I can recall that my son, Larry, and the Barnetts stayed friends up until his death, even. Clara and David are the Barnett's children. They were friends to my son. I came to find out that Larry had as many white friends as he did black friends.

He knew just as many whites as he did blacks.

Byrd: How about the women, themselves, in the group? Have they maintained close relations?

Bell: Yes, they have. I see Euline once a month. We are very close. We work on a committee together. One time we had an anniversary where all of us gathered together at Carol Riddlesperger's house. We all met out there, and we had a get-together there.

Byrd: Well, how long did the group actually last?

Bell: The group lasted a long time. It's a funny thing. I think that we weren't tired of one another. I think that after we accomplished certain things in the community, some of us still keep close contact with one another. You can say that we are close. I go on back to my son's death. When we lost him, I can remember those that came over to see me to pay their respects. There was some that could not come, but they'd call and send flowers. I recognized the names. So some of us are keeping a close contact with one another, so if we hear of something that has happened, we are there. When children got married, the blacks were invited to the white wedding, the whites were invited to the black wedding. So we just still have that closeness.

Byrd: When would you say the group kind of grew apart?

Bell: I think we grew apart in the 1970s, in the latter part of the 1970s. I really do. We had a get-together in the 1970s,

but I think we kind of grew apart in the latter part of the 1970s.

Byrd: Well, could you suggest or describe for me why you maybe you think that the group grew apart?

Bell: Describe why I think we grew apart?

Byrd: Yes.

Bell: I think that some of the blacks felt like we have accomplished some things in life. Also, lots of them moved away--whites--that we knew. Also, after we got the streets and entered the schools, I felt like that we thought, "Well, okay, we're going to just stop it here."

Byrd: Speaking of the school, was the group active in the movement to integrate Fred Moore High School?

Bell: Well, we worked together on that. I talked with several people. Well, they talked with me and said, "Okay, what do you want to do?" Really, it was real hard to decide if I really wanted my child to go to an integrated school. Would I be hurting him, or will he be pushed back in the corner? Would he get the same education as that white child sitting next to him? How would he be treated? I was concerned about that. My husband and I both were very concerned: "How will Larry be treated? Will Larry be able to handle a white, integrated school? How will we know if he's being treated fair? Will he be able to speak out and let me know?"

I'm going to refer back to Paul Young. He was a white minister here in Denton, and I worked for him once a week--he and his wife. We sort of talked about it, and I told him about how I felt about letting my child go to a white school. He said, "Well, one of the things that I'm going to recommend to you is that every day you talk with him, and you feel him out and see how things are going along with him." So I said, "I realize that I need to make this decision because school is approaching very close." He said, "Let him go this year; and then if you decide you don't want it next year, you can always pull him out and put him back in the black school." So my husband and I decided that we would let him go, and so this is what we did. He went to Stonewall Jackson. And here comes this big, strapping principal who met us at the door. I just thought, "Okay, you don't have to tell us." So he said, "What's your name?" Here I realized that he was a grandpa. In fact, I knew his daughter. I had worked with her at the State School. So we got to talking and everything.

Larry really enjoyed Stonewall Jackson. Later, we came to find out that Larry had lots of white friends. He really did. He did not have any problems. He wasn't no problem child. He knew how to take care of Larry. All of his teachers like him, and he liked the school. He played football in a little peewee league, and he played with lots

of his friends there.

We just had about one or two complaints, and my husband and I just went up there and talked with the principal. He said, "Don't you worry about this. I'll take care of it myself." And he took care of it!

I remember we had a complaint when one of the teachers put him out in the hallway, and she made him sit. So we went up there, and we talked with the principal again. We asked to see the teacher because we needed the teacher to talk with, too. So we all met and everything. We came to find out that she did not see Larry do anything to the little girl. She said that someone told her. So he said, "You put him out in the hallway?" She said, "Yes, because...." So he said, "Okay, let me call her parents." So her parents came, and we all got together, and we sat down, and we talked. The little girl said, "Well, I did hit him first." So her mother said, "You should not have hit him." He said, "Now I'll deal with you myself!" He told that to the teacher (chuckle). That's the only complaint that we had, really. I told them that I did not send him to school to be put out into the hallway because he was there to learn, not to sit out. I didn't go back to the Interracial Fellowship because I felt like that we could handle that.

I remember that there was another time when there was a teacher at Strickland saying that blacks smelled different

and all of this. She said that this is what she had read, and she was teaching this to the black children. So some of the black students came back and told us. Then we from our own group of black parents went over there, and we talked with them. This principal called for her, and she came. So we sat down, and we talked. She said that she would not teach there anymore, and the principal said, "I know you're not going to teach here anymore." We did this as all blacks. I never shall forget this.

Byrd: Was this a separate group then?

Bell: It was just concerned black parents. We got together. It was the black parents from the Interracial Fellowship.

Byrd: So it was kind of a core of them.

Bell: Right, black parents from the Interracial Fellowship. We got together, and we all went as black mothers, black parents, concerned parents.

Byrd: How was the actual integration accomplished, say, at Fred Moore?

Bell: At Fred Moore School? High School?

Byrd: Well, I know they closed Fred Moore shortly afterwards.

Bell: Yes, they closed Fred Moore.

Byrd: What tactics did they use?

Bell: Okay, they did have a meeting about closing Fred Moore School. There were parents that did not want the school closed. By us being newcomers, we didn't know anything about

Fred Moore, but we was willing to pull our child out of the white school and let him go back to the black school in order to keep them from closing it. I never shall forget. We said, "Okay, let this be an all-sixth grade school. Instead of you busing our kids, why not meet us halfway. We'd be willing to help the whites come over to Fred Moore and let this be a middle school." I can remember that some of the white parents in the Interracial Fellowship did not want that.

Byrd: It was my understanding that at the Trinity Presbyterian, when they integrated schools, there was a tutoring program. Can you describe how that worked?

Bell: I don't know too much because my child was not in the program, but I do know that there was parents and there were children who participated. Also, there was some at Pleasant Grove Baptist tutoring, too; they went there for tutoring. There was certified teachers, and there was concerned parents that helped tutor, too. Unfortunately, Larry did not attend any of those.

Byrd: It is my understanding that the group had something of a jobs program in the 1960s. Could you tell us a little bit about that?

Bell: Okay. We were orienting them as to going up and applying for different positions. I never shall forget Linnie McAdams. One time she applied at Moore Business Forms.

I remember her going, and she was accepted. She did get the job. Then there was several more. Out at the State School, it was hard for black people to get on. I applied, myself, and I never shall forget. I never did hear from them. I would call and never hear from them. I mentioned in the Interracial Fellowship that I applied, but I don't know what was the hold-up. I mentioned that, and so someone said, "If they need a recommendation, we will give it to you," and I did get a recommendation. So a couple of days later, I was hired at the State School.

Byrd: Were there other techniques in terms of the jobs program?

Bell: We worked together. There were young black women who wanted to get out of being maids and things. That was the only thing that was offered here in Denton, was just being a maid, or working out at North Texas in the kitchens. I don't think they hired too many blacks out at TWU. There was a real shortage of jobs here, and there still is, even at North Texas and different places. You wonder sometimes. You may have experience and you may be qualified, but still you are turned down. We have not accomplished enough in this area. There are blacks who have applied for jobs and things--blacks that I know of; blacks that would have three years training; blacks who have been off to school. They have gone and applied for jobs, and they were turned away as teacher aides in different places. We are very low

percentagewise of blacks being hired. Like I spoke before, we did not accomplish much in this area--we did not--and I guess we never will.

I know that when my son came out of school, he had to face that: "I have my degree, and I want to come back home." He applied with the city in the Recreation Department. There was an opening, but he did not get it. I don't know if he lacked experience or what. He did have experience working in New Mexico, but I don't think they considered this. He has his resume' and everything.

I think now that as a black person, as a black people, the doors will always be closed to us. I don't care if we have the highest degree--a Ph.D. You are not going to be hired anywhere. You just need someone inside to pull you inside. I know there's lots of qualified blacks around here who apply, and they have been turned down. You can look at the school district, and you can count the blacks that have been hired. That's one of the saddest things. We have not accomplished that. Now we have prepared our children to think that you have to be five times better than a white child in order to be hired.

It's real sad. It's real sad. We do have lots of children who have accomplished things, but the doors are being shut in their face. We do have black children who have gone and got their master's degree, and they still end

up being a sales clerk. And that's sad. It's so sad.

In the Interracial Fellowship did we succeed with the jobs program? We did not. We have not. We will not. I don't know what it's going to take for a black person to walk in and to present his resume' and his application to be hired. It's sad. It's very sad. I know that there is an aide who has been an aide for ten years, and she quit. This year she decided that she wanted to go back. She had a clean record, but she was not hired. Yet they hired someone who had never had any experience at being a teacher's aide. That's really heartbreaking to me. I might be putting my neck on the chopping block, but this is the way I feel. The Denton School District is real bad about that. They hire their friends; they do too much hiring inside. You take my husband. I'm not just saying this because it's him, but he's qualified at getting a job. He doesn't like for me to say this, but he is, you know. But it's sad that for black people the door will always be closed to us. That's the way I feel.

Byrd: Mrs. Bell, I'd like to thank you again for the time you spent with me this morning. I may need to talk to you again if that would be agreeable with you. We'll be in touch about that.

Bell: Okay. I don't know if you wanted to hear what I just got through saying, but it's true.

Byrd: Well, I appreciate you for saying it. Thank you again.