Transcriber: Shelley Lewis
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Tape Number 1

Interviewee: Mary Rideout – A graduate of Longwood College and a public school teacher from 1961 to 1991.
Interviewer: Shelley Lewis
Date of Interview: November 10, 2003

Shelley Lewis: This is Shelley Lewis interviewing Mary Rideout for Dr. Bidwell’s Honors Sociology of Education class. Um…Mary, I’d like to thank you for participating in this project. Um…Where did you grow up?

Mary Rideout: In Dinwiddie County

Shelley Lewis: Where and when did you go to college?


Shelley Lewis: At the time was it a public or private school?

Mary Rideout: Public

Shelley Lewis: About how big was Longwood at the time?

Mary Rideout: Less than a thousand. Little.

Shelley Lewis: Was it an integrated or segregated school?

Mary Rideout: It was segregated.

Shelley Lewis: Where – When did you know you wanted to be a teacher?

Mary Rideout: While I was at Longwood.

Shelley Lewis: What made you want to teach?

Mary Rideout: I originally was going to um just get a business degree and go to work, but I decided to go ahead and do my student teaching in case I changed my mind. My student teaching caused me to want to teach.

Shelley Lewis: Were any of your relatives teachers?

Mary Rideout: I have several cousins who taught, but no close relatives at that time.

Shelley Lewis: Where did you begin teaching?

Shelley Lewis: Describe the school.

Mary Rideout: The school was a very small school. The high school had about 75 students, but the school was grades one through twelve.

Shelley Lewis: What was an average day like in that school?

Mary Rideout: It was kind of quiet. Um… The students were very cooperative. I was a high school teacher so I taught basically tenth, eleventh, and twelfth graders and they were a fun group to teach.

Shelley Lewis: When did you begin teaching?


Shelley Lewis: What subject did you teach?

Mary Rideout: I was a business education teacher. I had typing, shorthand, accounting, business math, business law.

Shelley Lewis: How many different schools did you teach in?

Mary Rideout: Three

Shelley Lewis: What were they?

Mary Rideout: I was at Jarratt High School, Stony Creek High School, and Sussex Central High School.

Shelley Lewis: What were your feelings about the Brown decision? The Brown vs. Board of Education 1954.

Mary Rideout: I guess I really didn’t have much feeling about it. I [have] always been in the south and always been around blacks. I’d worked with them on the farm and it just really didn’t make a lot of difference to me.

Shelley Lewis: Right. What did other teachers you worked with say about the decision?

Mary Rideout: I really don’t remember discussing it with them. Not, not as a discussion, so I really don’t know.
Shelley Lewis: Did you hear parents talk about the decision?

Mary Rideout: Not really. When I first started teaching in 1961, it was an all white school, but a couple of years later, we did have just a few under um Freedom of Choice. A few blacks under Freedom of Choice so therefore the parents really didn't have much to say.

Shelley Lewis: Are you familiar with the Massive Resistance Movement in Virginia after the Brown decision?

Mary Rideout: Not really because being in a small local area, we didn’t see much of problems like that.

Shelley Lewis: Were you aware of the events in Prince Edward County surrounding integration?

Mary Rideout: Aware of some of them yes, because going to school at Longwood, of course, we were interested in what was going on in that area.

Shelley Lewis: Do you remember when the students walked out? Were you at Longwood then?

Mary Rideout: I think that was before I went to Longwood.

Shelley Lewis: What county were you teaching in when schools were integrated?

Mary Rideout: In Sussex County. I taught there for 30 years, the full 30 I was teaching.

Shelley Lewis: What were the general feelings between the races in the county?

Mary Rideout: There was no real bad feeling. Um... Again being in a rural county, they had more or less grown up together on the farms and working and it wasn’t a lot of feelings against other races.

Shelley Lewis: Was integration openly opposed? Probably not since it was a rural county.

Mary Rideout: Not a lot. However, they did start a private school in Sussex County and we lost some of our white students because of the private school in Sussex.

Shelley Lewis: When did they start the private school?

Mary Rideout: In the early sixties I believe.
Shelley Lewis: Were you teaching when they started it?

Mary Rideout: I’m not sure I was teaching when they started it, but I was aware that it was there because I had friends who sent their children to the private school.

Shelley Lewis: When did schools in your county actually integrate?

Mary Rideout: Full integration was 196-no, I take it back, that was when it was more Freedom of Choice. The complete integration was 1970-71.

Shelley Lewis: With the Freedom of Choice, when does that take place?

Mary Rideout: That took place probably in 63 or 64, because I taught at Jarratt High School for five years. Freedom of Choice was going on during part of that time, so it had to be 62, 63 somewhere in that period of time.

Shelley Lewis: How did that work? What happened with the Freedom of Choice schools?

Mary Rideout: Freedom of Choice schools worked fine. In that 75 or 80 students we had, we probably had ten blacks in all.

Shelley Lewis: Were there any black teachers in your high school or were they all white?

Mary Rideout: They were all white until I went to Sussex Central in 1971.

Shelley Lewis: What portion of the teachers there were black? Do you know?

Mary Rideout: Probably 70 to 75 percent were black when it was totally integrated.

Shelley Lewis: So white teachers were a minority.

Mary Rideout: We were a minority at that point, yes.

Shelley Lewis: What kind of resources did your school have once you integrated?

Mary Rideout: The same they had before they were integrated. I mean it didn’t change much. Sussex County um I really don’t think had a lot of changes in what was taught and what. There may have been a few more subjects, but as far as the actual resources, I don’t think there was a big difference in things that went [on] from before integration and after integration.
Shelley Lewis: Did people in the community consider yours a good school or a poor school?

Mary Rideout: The people in the community (who sent their)\(^1\) children to the public school, probably thought it was a good school. There were people in the community who said it was a poor school and that's why they sent their children to a private school.

Shelley Lewis: What was done in your county to achieve integration? Did they use busing or did they use some other way?

Mary Rideout: They just simply revamped the schools. Made one central high school for the entire county, two junior highs, and it must have been six or seven elementary schools.

Shelley Lewis: Were any new schools built?

Mary Rideout: Not at that time, no.

Shelley Lewis: How did integration of the school affect you personally?

Mary Rideout: It really didn't, I don't guess. I know I was a little apprehensive the first day I walked into the high school of complete integration, but it wasn't a real big deal. I had friends, teacher friends who were also moved to that school. Like I said, we were a little apprehensive but things worked out fine.

Shelley Lewis: Can you talk about some of the things you were apprehensive about or describe your feelings that first day?

Mary Rideout: Well, I guess I was a little apprehensive because it was a new situation, um, not knowing what to expect. I walked into a situation not knowing how many students I was going to have, not knowing who they were, overcrowded classrooms at that point. I remember the first day, I was there, I had-we had six class periods and I had six classes and I had a total of over 200 students in those six classes the first day. Um, overrun classes, but the principal did come around and change it and I ended up with a total of approximately 175 students each day.

Shelley Lewis: What was your average class size?

Mary Rideout: 26, 27

\(^1\) Included on tape but accidentally deleted.
Shelley Lewis: How did integration affect the classroom curriculum? Did you have to revise your lesson plans?

Mary Rideout: The only revision I really had to do was to prepare for larger class sizes. Because, I had been used to, when I first started teaching, eight, ten, twelve, in a classroom, and I ended up with 25 to 30. Quite a difference in lesson preparation, to have something to keep that many students, their interest going for that length of time.

Shelley Lewis: Were new textbooks selected? Maybe not in your subject because it was business, but for history or math or science? Do you know?

Mary Rideout: I don’t think they were selected other than the normal selection. I’m not sure, but I think it was just the normal selection that would go for whatever number of years they had before they get new textbooks.

Shelley Lewis: How were parent/teacher relations affected by integration?

Mary Rideout: I guess the first year, we got to see a lot of parents, but as I got to teaching, the parent/teacher relationship kind of dwindled, because the parents just didn’t show up for parent/teacher conferences a lot of them. And a lot didn’t show up for parent/teacher meetings. And the first year, they all wanted to know the teachers but after that, it kind of dwindled.

Shelley Lewis: Would you say that they got more comfortable with the situation or...

Mary Rideout: Oh I think they got comfortable. To give you a good example of how comfortable the students were, I can remember I had a senior class to sponsor and we went in the first week or so to elect the class officers, and of course Sussex was about 80% black, 20% white. They elected their president. They nominated their students and a black one was nominated and a white one was nominated. The black one was elected. They got to the vice president. The same thing happened. When they got to the treasure-to the secretary, they had one black guy that I can remember who looked around. And I happened to be standing [near], he said, “This is not working.” And he nominated a white student for secretary. For the rest of the officers, they alternated them so that the whites would have a part in it. So that class just happened to be one that could see that if they were going to work together they had to stay away from black line and white line and work together. And it was an excellent group to work with. They really, really gave a good start to integration in Sussex County.

Shelley Lewis: That sounds like a wonderful idea.
Mary Rideout: Yes. Some mature students.

Shelley Lewis: Yes. Describe the racial composition of the school before integration in terms of student body body, faculty, and administrators.

Mary Rideout: Well, like I said, I worked in a [small school] when I first started. [A] school of approximately 75 or 80 students. They had one teacher, maybe one section might have had two, for grades one through seven, and then you had a teacher for your English, a teacher for your history, a teacher for all of your sciences. The same basically held true for the next four years when I moved to what was basically a junior high or seven through twelve. But then when I got to the high school, it was everybody in the county. So, let me see if I can figure out how many students we had. We had about 180 graduating that year and we had grades nine through twelve, so we probably had eight or nine hundred students and probably 25 teachers maybe. I don't know. I don't remember how many teachers. It's been a long time.

Shelley Lewis: Do you think your school was typical of public schools in your area as far as integration went?

Mary Rideout: Typical for the rural area, yes. Maybe not for what would have been in a city. But for our rural area, I think it was typical. I think the students and the teachers did as good a job of integrating the schools as any of the rural counties around here anyway.

Shelley Lewis: It sounds like everything went smoothly. How did people in your family feel about school integration?

Mary Rideout: My family didn't object because I, I was teaching. I remember a student, this wasn't a family member, but, I remember a student asking me one day if I was prejudiced and I looked right at him and I said, "No. If I was prejudiced, I would not be teaching in this school." And my family had no, no qualms with me teaching in an integrated school.

Shelley Lewis: What were your feelings on the subject?

Mary Rideout: Apprehensive at first, but I knew if I wanted a job, I better go take it while I had it.

Shelley Lewis: How did other teachers and administrators feel about and react to integration?

Mary Rideout: I think we all got along well. Some of my best friends were black teachers, during the year, as we went along. Even later I took classes
with black teachers, even roomed with a black teacher at a con-a summer class. So, I mean, I think teachers got along well.

Shelley Lewis: How were integration and the issues surrounding it discussed at faculty meetings? I guess, how did they announce it to you when they decided to integrate?

Mary Rideout: I really don’t remember them ever announcing it. We just knew it was coming, that they were going to revamp the schools and we knew based on your subject matter that you were going to the high school. It wasn’t any question. If I wanted to keep a job, I had to move to the high school. No other reason.

Shelley Lewis: Was there increased security in the school when the school first integrated?

Mary Rideout: No. We had our normal principal and assistant principal. That was it.

Shelley Lewis: Were other special measures put into place because of integration?

Mary Rideout: Not that I remember anything different being done.

Shelley Lewis: You talked about earlier that you remember some families moving their children to public-I mean private schools. Do you remember any other specifics about those events or why they decided to do that?

Mary Rideout: I just remember some of them, particularly who had girls, said they wanted to keep their little girls, not-I won’t say safe because that’s not the word, they just wanted to keep their little girls, little girls, and they sent them to private schools. I really, you know, I couldn’t see why because it was costing money. And I can remember one parent making the statement that to another parent, said, “But you don’t know who your child’s teacher’s going to be.” And the other one said, “Neither do you, but I don’t have to pay to find out who mine is.”

Shelley Lewis: How did the white students in your school respond to desegregation?

Mary Rideout: I think they responded well. We had white students on the basketball teams. Not too many of them played football because the white schools didn’t have football teams before integration, but they played basketball. I can remember one white student making a comment the first year. He says, “Now I know how,” and he named a couple of the black students who had played on a predominantly white team when they were at Stony Creek, and he said, “Now I know how they felt.” Because he was a white student playing on a predominantly black team and he said, “We went to schools that were predominantly
black.” And he said, “I know now how they felt when they were with us,” and he said, “It really makes me have a different feeling for them.” and I thought that was well said.

Shelley Lewis: How did the African-American students respond to desegregation?

Mary Rideout: Again, we’re in a rural area. They’d grown up together all their lives and I just think they responded real well. You’ll always have problems, you’re going to have problems whether it’s all white, all black, or both and there were some minor problems. But, basically they accepted it, went right along, did what they were supposed to do. White ones did what they were supposed to do and we had a good year.

Shelley Lewis: How were interactions between students in your classroom affected by integration?

Mary Rideout: That’s kind of hard to say, because I had one or two classes that were all black. But there again, some of the classes, they were putting-trying to get the students proportion wise so that no one white child was isolated in a class. But since, I was a business teacher and my subjects were basically electives, I had a couple of classes that were predominantly black and I had some that had probably 50% white, which was way above the 80, 20 population that we had. But since, it was a selective one it was choice.

Shelley Lewis: Right. Have you retired?

Mary Rideout: Yes I have.

Shelley Lewis: How do you think school systems have changed since the time of integration?

Mary Rideout: Oh my goodness. I don’t know that the school systems themselves have changed, but I retired in 91 and I did a 20-day session for twelve years and just finished it June of this year. Um, and I could see a difference in the students themselves, and the lack of discipline and the lack of home values, during those twelve years as much as any other and I guess it’s because I didn’t see them everyday.

Shelley Lewis: How have race relations in your area changed since integration?

Mary Rideout: Goodness, in our area, right around here, we have very few blacks who live right around me and at one time, they were all around. Right in my own little neighborhood, we have very few blacks. But, I think it’s because the blacks have moved to better jobs and better surroundings.
And I don’t think there’s a lot of difference. We still have blacks who help us on the farm. We don’t have any to go to church with us yet, but it’s not because they can’t. It’s because they don’t choose to.

Shelley Lewis: Reflecting on the past, what can you think of that would have made desegregation in your area easier? Sounds like it went pretty smooth.

Mary Rideout: It went pretty smooth. I don’t know that there could have been a lot done to make it easier. I think the people accepted it. I, like I said, respect those who sent their children to private school. The ones who went to the public school accepted it. They wanted to see it work and they made it work.

Shelley Lewis: What effect do you think integration had on the education of black and white children?

Mary Rideout: That I’m not real sure because not teaching in a black school until it was integrated, it was hard to know what they already, already [knew] what their standards were and all. And I don’t think-we did not lower any standards. We kept them. I didn’t [lower], others may have, but I kept my standards exactly like they were. I made no exceptions. I did nothing different.

Shelley Lewis: Are there other comments you would like to add about integration and education?

Mary Rideout: I just, I taught for 30 years and those 30 were good years. I had a few little problems, like everybody else does. You always have a few discipline problems, but basically, I had good kids to work with. And again, I can say it because my subjects were elective subjects and I didn’t get someone in my class who didn’t want to be there. So I guess I had some better experiences maybe than some of the others did.

Shelley Lewis: Do you think it would have been different if you taught a subject like history or math or science?

Mary Rideout: It might have because everybody had to take history and I do know some of the teachers said you know when you get everybody you’ve got those that don’t want to do. But I can say I had good kids. They pretty much wanted to be there. Except for one, and I kid her all the time now. She now is the Commissioner of Revenue in Sussex County, and I had her in accounting and she didn’t want to do it. All she wanted was to get out of class, get out of school, pass it. And she tells me now, “I wish I had listened to you and done what you told me, but all I wanted to do was to get out of school.” So you have those
that you think back and you have some favorite moments and some favorite students, and some favorite times that you think about and working with so many. When you teach for 30 years you have a lot of memories and a lot of students floating around. Everywhere you go, you run into them.

Shelley Lewis: Right. Well, thank you again for participating in this project.

Mary Rideout: Well, you're welcome.