

Transcript, Interview of J.D. Thomas by Joyce Hinds, November 24, 2008

This interview will become part of the Georgetown Public Library's oral history collection. This project focuses on people's memories of Marshall and Carver Schools and the issues and events of the 1950s and '60s that led to desegregation. My name is Joyce Hines, today is November 24, 2008. We are in the Georgetown Public Library. Please state your full name, any nicknames, and your birth date.

J.D. THOMAS: My name is J. D. Thomas, Jr. My birth date is June 30, 1919. I don't have any nicknames, but my initials are my full name.

JOYCE HINDS: We're beginning this interview, this question-answer, at about 1:10 p.m. First of all, how long have you lived in Georgetown?

J.D. THOMAS: All my life--89 years, 89 and a half, thereabouts.

JOYCE HINDS: What neighborhood in Georgetown did you live in during the 1940s and 1950s?

J.D. THOMAS: In the 1940s and '50s I lived over in the eastern part of Georgetown--northeast part of Georgetown, on Walnut Street, north Walnut.

JOYCE HINDS: And, was there any ethnic diversity there at that time?

J.D. THOMAS: No.

JOYCE HINDS: None at all?

J.D. THOMAS: Uh uh. In fact when we lived there, that was the edge of town. Our house was the next to the last one on the street of Walnut.

JOYCE HINDS: And what was the street address?

J.D. THOMAS: Our street address was 302 Walnut.

JOYCE HINDS: Describe your educational background.

J.D. THOMAS: I had two years of college at A&M besides my high school education. I graduated from Georgetown High School in 1937. And following that I went to A&M and I was there two years and then the war started, I mean the world situation started where, well, a group of us quit A&M to go into the service and we were a little eager. My brother went into the Army and I went into the Navy.

JOYCE HINDS: And how long did you serve in the Navy?

J.D. THOMAS: Two years. While I was in the Navy, while I was overseas, my father died and I found out about it about six weeks after he passed away and about a month and a half after he passed away I came back to the United States and I was here at Watsonville, California until June of that year. They were going to transfer me to Grand Prairie because I had asked to get as close to home as I could. See my mother--I still had little brothers and sister at home. I'm the oldest of nine.

And so, I...they transferred me to Grand Prairie. But on the Sunday morning... they were going to transfer me on Tuesday...on Sunday morning the County Judge called my commanding officer to tell him that my wife had been taken to Brackenridge Hospital and she had polio...the lung type...and so, they were...since they were going to send me on Tuesday, well they just gave me my papers and I came home on Monday and the next Monday...next Sunday, well, she passed away. So, I got after my commanding officer to help me...get me out of the Navy and get me home...I was needed at home. And I didn't get much cooperation from him. And so, I was here one weekend...do you want this?

JOYCE HINDS: Yes, go ahead.

J.D. THOMAS: I was home one weekend and a lady...a young lady that lived across the street said, you need to talk to this gentleman that's from Washington and he comes

down here real regular. She says, I think he could help you. And so she called me and told me when he would be in Austin. And so I got liberty and I came down and talked with him and he told me...says, I'm going back to Washington tomorrow and I'll call you Thursday. So when I came home my mother asked me, what did he say? And I said the gentleman could sell an Eskimo a refrigerator without any trouble!

Well, I was on the flight line up there and on Thursday afternoon I came in and I was walking into the hangar with my parachute and the...my name was called over the speaker that I had a long distance telephone call. And I went and told the operator who I was and she said, go ahead sir. He says, hello J.D., this is Lyndon! I went to see the Navy department today. You'll be out Saturday! (J.D. laughs then both laugh.) So, that was how Lyndon Johnson worked, but...

JOYCE HINDS: So, did you come back to Georgetown then...immediately?

J.D. THOMAS: I came back...I came back to Georgetown immediately then.

JOYCE HINDS: That was what year?

J.D. THOMAS: That was in 1945.

JOYCE HINDS: 1945. And so you've lived here ever since then?

J.D. THOMAS: Um hmm. No, my...I was needed at home. See, when I got out...before I joined the Navy I got married and while I was in the Navy we had a little girl, and my first wife's parents both were dead and so there was nobody to keep her. My mother said she would keep her, and this was more for my mother and I needed to be at home. My father was a rancher and cattle buyer here and he had quite extensive operations scattered over a lot of portions of the county, so I was really needed here. And so it was a good thing that I could get out and get home.

JOYCE HINDS: After you got back to Georgetown, when did you become involved in the local politics?

J.D. THOMAS: I didn't get involved in the local politics until about...oh, I guess it was about in 1969, somewhere along in there. I was working in the post office then and they didn't really...they didn't really approve of my...(laughs)...involvement, so I hadn't been involved. But I ran for the school board and was elected to the school board.

JOYCE HINDS: That was in 1969?

J.D. THOMAS: I believe that's the date. And what we did, we passed a bond issue on...just a short time after that...and then the bond issue was contested and we were supposedly promoting segregation, which we were not. But anyway, what they did, they tied up the use of the bond money until we got the thing settled.

JOYCE HINDS: What motivated you to run for school board?

J.D. THOMAS: Well...you see, I had brothers and sisters that were still in school, I had children that were in school, and so, I had an interest in it in that way. My children were involved and I felt like, well, this...I felt like the bond issue itself was something that was good for Georgetown because I had on one occasion...and I don't know what brought it up...but anyway, I went to the colored school...or to the black school...and I was absolutely appalled by the conditions that those children were attending school in.

JOYCE HINDS: What were some of the things that you saw that appalled you?

J.D. THOMAS: Well, you had to watch where you walked or you'd fall through the floor. I mean, it was bad! And the facilities they had were just poor! And, see, when my father was living, and when we were at home, my father worked a lot of Mexicans and Negroes and I'd been associated with them when I was growing up and they were just like me. They were just good human beings. They had different color skin, but that didn't really bother me. And so, when...before my father died, well, one of these...the men worked for him...well, he died, the man died, and they had four children, I believe it was...two boys and two girls...and so, course we had a houseful at home, there were nine of us and my grandfather stayed with us...lived with us...and so what my father did, he fixed a...in the barn that we had...well, he fixed a room there where these children could stay. We had

no other place to put them. But anyway, until here, just recently, one of them lived just right across the street over here.

JOYCE HINDS: What was the family name?

J.D. THOMAS: Yes, just a minute and I'll tell you. Jackson. Herbert Jackson lived right over here...

JOYCE HINDS: Very close to the library?

J.D. THOMAS: Well, very close to the old library, across from the old library. And if you remember Janet Pardner that worked at Wal-Mart...she has always had sort of orange-colored hair...she dyed it, you know...she was one of the girls.

JOYCE HINDS: How long did they live there on the premises of your parents' place?

J.D. THOMAS: For a year or so.

JOYCE HINDS: For a year...

J.D. THOMAS: Umhmm. But there were things like this that...and I had been involved with...I had some friends, for instance, Carl Doering and Jay Wolf and Dr. Gaddy, and all...we were concerned about...we had talked about this and we were concerned about it and so between them...those that I mentioned...there was Wilbur Munson and others that I don't recall at the moment. But we had a concern for it. We wanted to build a junior high then, out on Williams Drive, and we wanted to build over on the west side of town where it would be convenient for everybody. And this area here, here, [referring to the neighborhood near the library – west of MLK, between 2nd and 11th Streets] was a black section for the most part and they had built the school out there and those that were closer could go over on Williams Drive. But, anyway...

JOYCE HINDS: So you meant the schools to be integrated?

J.D. THOMAS: Yes, but in 1964, I think they took care of that matter. We were going...the schools were going to be integrated whether we liked it or not. There were those that didn't like the idea of it, but this is the only way to go.

JOYCE HINDS: How did you feel about it at the time?

J.D. THOMAS: How did I feel about it? I felt...I felt...that these children ought to be treated the same way as my children...have every opportunity, every...chance to be their real thing...and this was one of the reasons why...well, I just thought, I wouldn't...first of all...I wouldn't want my children going to school down there, in that situation. And, my children are no different from theirs in this respect. Both the blacks and the whites deserve the same opportunity. This is one more reason why I'm proud of our new president because what we're doing, we're coming more to the point where we ARE one. And I think...my personal feelings are...that's the way it ought to be.

JOYCE HINDS: How long did you serve on the school board?

J.D. THOMAS: Six years. Two terms.

JOYCE HINDS: And did you get the bond approved eventually, before you left?

J.D. THOMAS: Yes.

JOYCE HINDS: So you had to be very proud of that.

J.D. THOMAS: Yes. We went all the way to...Houston. We went to Houston. We didn't accomplish it in Austin. We went to Houston and then we went to New Orleans. I believe I'm right, there. And there was a group from Southwestern that opposed our building there. They're all friends of mine, but they just knew that we were going to...you see, one of the things that gave them that feeling was...the property that...where that school is built now belonged to my mother...this was the only property we could find that served the purpose. I said, well, I will...leave me out of it completely. I won't vote on it, I won't have any part in it at all. And so, that's the way it worked.

JOYCE HINDS: So, what is the name of the school? What was the name of the school that was built? That's on the property that was your mother's?

J.D. THOMAS: It just seems that it was Westside...Westside Elementary. That's the way it was. You see, then they hadn't built the hospital and they hadn't built the post office and all of that there. My mother owned the property up to Scenic Drive...or Railroad Street it is now. She owned the property...and so what they did in the meantime, well...before the school bought...she sold off property down to, well, actually, it's the boundary of the school now. She had sold off that much. And it was an ideal piece of property for this school.

JOYCE HINDS: So when you finished your term, after those six years, what did you feel like you'd accomplished?

J.D. THOMAS: Well, I felt like...I'll tell you what we did. We integrated once we had the schools all built and ready to go. Then on the first day of school the black students that were going to the high school, which was the one on University Avenue...the ones who were going to school there...we told them, OK, this will be...you will go to school there...you'll be there the first day of school. And so we told the news--the television and the newspapers--you can't get within 3 blocks of the school. And so, these kids went to school...no excitement from the news or anything else...and it worked that way.

JOYCE HINDS: What was the fear about the...what the news people might do?

J.D. THOMAS: Well, we didn't...we didn't have any real fear, but what we did want, we wanted these youngsters that were coming to school there for the first time...well, we wanted them to feel like this was theirs. We didn't want the news making a big deal out of it, you know, taking pictures of them and all of this, you know...and we wanted it to go quietly and it did. And through the years it has worked that way. I feel like that a lot of the things that need to be done...that on occasions get out of hand...and become unruly or things of that nature...I feel like that if we just stop and think a moment we can take care of the matter without a lot of excitement and trouble and everything else. And so that's the way we did it and I was real glad of that.

JOYCE HINDS: That was a big accomplishment.

J.D. THOMAS: I felt like it was. And, I had...in the meantime I had become...well, I was assistant postmaster when most of that was taking place and before the time my term was up, the postmaster died and I became officer in charge...of the post office here in Georgetown. So, Mr. Pickle was our representative and Mr. Pickle and I were real good friends, and he told me, he said, I'm not going to recommend you for the postmaster. He says I owe a debt to Charlie Forbes...and Charlie at one time had been mayor here. He said, he's been helpful to me and he says, I'm aware of all these things that you've done...and so Mr. Forbes came on as postmaster and he stayed three months...and Exxon...he was the Exxon agent here...Exxon told him he could either be their man or be the post office's...just take his choice (laughs). So Mr. Pickle called me and says, I'm recommending you tomorrow to the government to become postmaster. And I did. And then Mr. Nixon came out in 1972 and he said that if you're 50 years of age and have got 25 years of service, we'll give you 5% increase in your annuity and your life insurance will be paid, your health insurance taken care of, and you can retire (laughs). And I said, send me the papers!

JOYCE HINDS: Sounds like a good deal. What year was that?

J.D. THOMAS: 1972.

JOYCE HINDS: 1972--you retired! Are there any other details about the desegregation events that you might want to add here before we...move to another....

J.D. THOMAS: You know, of course, it was...then, well it was a lot of involvement on the part of law and all, and court action and all, and Judge Lott was our lawyer and he was an excellent assistance for us in all of that. He knew what he was doing and how to do it and how to get it done and he was a real help in making it go off like it did.

JOYCE HINDS: What did your family members think about desegregating...Georgetown desegregating the schools?

J.D. THOMAS: They felt about like I did. My personal family...my own...my kids...had no problem with it. Of course my wife and I...we both felt the same way. And, at home, well, my sisters and brother that were still there...this wasn't any big...course, they'd played with Herbert and all of them when they were growing up (laughs)...

JOYCE HINDS: ...when they were growing up. What about friends? Did you have any friends who disagreed with the desegregation?

J.D. THOMAS: Um hmm...sure did. I had one that...that called me two or three times and he told me, you know, you'll be sorry, you'll be sorry. And that's putting it nice.

JOYCE HINDS: Did you feel like he was threatening you?

J.D. THOMAS: No, he wasn't threatening me. He and I were friends. But he just felt like he needed to tell me how...first of all he...he thought he could tell me what I should do. And, when I didn't do it, well then...and he was a prominent person here in Georgetown and...but I told him, I said, this is...the government has told us we're going to do this whether we like it or not and what we might as well do...it's gotta be done. Let's do it in a nice way, where it's good for everybody because further on down the line you're going to be faced with the matter that you're going to have to integrate these schools and everything.

JOYCE HINDS: What about your church? Did you get any feedback from the people at your church?

J.D. THOMAS: No. In fact, the business is...this is the way we...well, we believe the Bible. And the Bible tells us that all men are created equal. And that, first of all, we should love one another. And this is something that a lot of people have trouble with, but I feel like that as far as I'm concerned...I believe what the scripture has to say. I believe that...a lot of us are going to be held accountable for the way that we treat one another.

JOYCE HINDS: I know your church is integrated. How long has it been integrated? Do you recall?

J.D. THOMAS: Well...I tell you what we did first. First thing we did, when...while the jail was still back over here...we started going to the jail and talking to the prisoners there. We got permission to go and talk to the prisoners there. And when we built the new one down here, we built a little building across the street from that...it's back about a block. And we had a black man that had come here from Illinois. And he wanted to work with the prisoners. He was a member of the church that I attend. So, what we did, we had a member of our church from Illinois...or Indiana...and he wanted to be involved with the same thing, so he started going to this jail. And we have deacons that are black and we're all one.

JOYCE HINDS: Did you have any...you said you had the one friend that was upset about the desegregation...did you think personally you experienced any negative consequences from your work on the school board?

J.D. THOMAS: No, we're real good friends and this is the way he felt, and it didn't affect our...we had our conversations about it, but it didn't affect our friendship. The fact of it is he was a good friend of mine until he died. He was older than I was, so this was one more thing. He was...well, actually, he was old enough to be my father and so that made a difference with him. He was a member of the old school. Come to the back door and all of this you know. And you don't come inside. But we had...when I was at home...we had a black lady that cooked and she was just part of the family. There was Aunt Mary, and she was part of the family. So we...my brothers and sisters and I, we all grew up with associating with them and it was one more reason why I didn't have any problem with them.

JOYCE HINDS: Did you think there were any negative consequences of desegregation? Anything that you see as negative, or do you think it was all positive to desegregate in Georgetown?

J.D. THOMAS: I feel like it was all positive. Oh, we might as well be...we can't say that completely because I'm sure that there were some that...situations where it wasn't as positive, but on the whole it was a good thing. It was good for the town, the community, and most of all, it was good for the kids.

JOYCE HINDS: No...how...do you see it as good for both the white kids and the black students?

J.D. THOMAS: Well, you know, let's just...like for right now. We might as well face it. We have...first of all, we were the ones that developed this slavery situation. And, we did it because it was a money-making thing. And that's all a thing of the past and the quicker we put it behind us, the better. And then there are those that don't approve of our black president, but I'm glad...course, I'm a Democrat--lifelong!...but at the same time, of course, Georgetown is a Republican community and I'm sure that so far as the community is concerned with the selection...needless to say, they would have rather had McCain. But, I'm glad to see what Mr. Obama is doing. Did you happen to see his speech at 11:00?

JOYCE HINDS: I saw just a little bit of it.

J.D. THOMAS: Well, he has...he's got blacks, whites, women, Republicans, Democrats...and that is the way it should be. And one thing I like about what he has to say...just like I've said right here, over and over, you know, we're just one. We're all human beings. We may have different colors, different languages, such as that, but we're all human beings and we need to treat one another like that. He's bringing in people that have opposed him and everything else and I think that...he made a remark on two or three occasions this morning that it's not just Wall St. and the public, it's all of us, together, that we're in this together. He's right.

JOYCE HINDS: So, you see the election of...a black person as a natural outgrowth of the desegregation?

J.D. THOMAS: Yes. I felt like that in time we would have a black president, and I feel like in time we'll have a woman president. And...what's wrong with it? You're just as...because you're a woman, that doesn't mean you can't serve your country as president. And, of course, Hillary lost. I'm glad to see him including Hillary and the fact is, I would kind of liked to see him include her as vice president, but I also know there's a problem there, and that's her husband. (Laughs)

JOYCE HINDS: I think we've gotten really good information. I really enjoyed talking with you. Do you have any final comments about the desegregation movement in Georgetown?

J.D. THOMAS: Not really. I think that it's gone off well. Course there have been times, I'm sure when we've had some...few ups and downs, but for the most part it's gone off real well.

JOYCE HINDS: Thank you so much.

J.D. THOMAS: Oh, you're welcome!