

Ethel Tompkins Interview Summary
First Person Plural
7 April 2016, 21 April 2016

Intro – Jo Blatti interviewing Ethel Tompkins April 7, 2016 Lawrence County Public Library

JB First thing, your own background, much about Hoxie, nothing about you

ET Born Post Oak, 23 mi. south of Tuckerman, birth-10 years, Jackson County
Dad tired of sharecropping, hard to raise family
One hog, half a cow for family of six – included mom's mother, two grandparents, half-sister
Uncle worked for railroad, got my father a job, moved to Hoxie

5 min in

Cross ties, four-man crew
Automated, laid off
Digging graves, foot power
Mom – housekeeping
Once again automated, backhoe
Late 1960s – yard work

JB Remember railroad – mechanized tie work?

ET 1968-69

JB Hoxie, railroad town, community of folks?

ET Most of other people porters
Stations in transition, phasing out – MOPAC [Missouri Pacific] one side, Frisco [St Louis-San Francisco Railway] other side
My dad would carry bags one station to the other
By early 1964-65, [passenger] railroad had dissipated from Hoxie
Passenger trains had gone away - driving, flying

10 min in

As a lot of small towns, died

Dad officially retired 1988-89, mom still did housework occasionally
Mom, 'Miss Thursday' 28 years nursing home every week to help out
When she had stroke, I moved back

JB How folks meet?

ET Neighbors – dad's first wife died in childbirth, my mother & grandmother took care of child
Later married, I was born 4 years later

JB Half sister in this area?

ET Not through integration

15 min in

Bussed to Jonesboro, Booker T. Washington High School

JB Town had 2000 people [time of school integration], 1000 were school kids, Hoxie 21

ET Almost all the black families had gone north for work – just a few stayed

JB Surprised, quite so small an African American population on edge of delta

ET No work Hoxie, Walnut Ridge

JB Lot of people part of post-WWII exodus, part of Arkansas story

ET My dad was older, didn't want to go. My sister got married right out of high school, husband Air Force
I graduated high school 1961, wanted college

JB Idea college?

ET Dad – didn't want me to do what he & mom did

JB Lot of books & news in the house?

ET No. Every Saturday I would help my mom at tourist cabins, could keep all the books and newspapers there, would see the world a bit

20 min in

JB Back to Shorter College

ET Supported by Methodist Church, each district supported a student, less than half the cost

JB How make up the rest?

ET Housekeeping, waiting tables, still early 1960s, not totally open
Discouraged black people from applying

By being in navy, learned how to be with other people, be in large area
Integration taught me that, too
Hoxie no segregation –

25 min in

Money only factor where people lived, we had sleepovers, played together

JB Different from other parts of state – front porch relationships

ET Thin line, even in other parts of Hoxie

We went to black church

JB Memories of teacher before -?

ET Great teacher – Mrs Trotter

JB Understand full teaching credentials
Did she board around with families?

30 min in

ET With Viola Meadows [white fellow teacher] most of time, sometimes would drive her to Little Rock
Come back up on the railroad

Had to be inventive, didn't have the materials
Invented ways to teach times table, reading, conjunctions
Mrs Trotter made it rhyme, wrote herself [refers to more recent Schoolhouse Rock]
When integrated schools, thought we wouldn't be up to par, tested higher because of her

JB Move with you?

ET Don't know if not offered, didn't want
She was great

Notes boarding in African American student families, also

35 min in

ET Discusses work with others to document/commemorate Hoxie school integration
Life magazine photographic coverage of Hoxie children in 1955, impact on white citizens group
Story of parent sent Emmett Till photograph

40 min in

Talks about the documentary film made in 2003 on the subject, *Hoxie: The First Stand*, David Appleby producer, PBS

Approximately 10 –year hiatus, no African American students in town following her graduation & two others in 1960s

JB Remember how you felt as all this happening [age 12]?

ET No attempt to intimidate the kids

45 min in

JB Unlike Little Rock –

ET Most of the intimidation was against the school board

Compares Hoxie & Little Rock situations – Jim Johnson as key figure in both

50 min in

Discussion of historical black communities in the Ozarks and north east Arkansas, operations of power politics

55 min in

ET Slowly trying to research Lynn, Strawberry area

My Family just happened to be in an area where they were accepted

JB White workers on dad's crew?

ET Yes, only requirement strong backs

Second crew all white, all black, mixed
Don't know if from around here

About six years old, going to gin with father in Newport, Saturday
Two water fountains, on broken
Can't drink out of fountain
Reserved whites only, remember that

We never ate out, couldn't afford
Other families told, had to go to back

ET Tuckerman motel

JB Pointed out to me, Louis Jordan stayed there

ET Hoxie sports team – when teams went out [of town to play]
Others forfeited because school integrated

JB 1955-68?

ET 1968? Won a lot of games by default
Coach took Wesley Washington [talented track student] to Pine Bluff [UAPB] – shot put record

I understand no team would play Hoxie

60 min in

JB Looking at numbers, 21 students, not a lot of you

ET Goes through the grades – elementary – high school [most] for each student

JB Up and out group in impact –

ET Miniscule –

JB Large in one way –
Tell me about being in the navy

ET Describes boot camp experience in Maryland, initial assignment as aircraft controller in San Diego, California

Change to security detail, ultimately honor guard, special duty, admiral's aide,

65 min in

Describes work as admiral's aide, later special duty security work – movie premiere, carrier into port

70 min in

JB How to librarian?

ET Fell into in north Arkansas

Returned to area to look after parents. Took a position with local bank – back office, statements after hours

In the library, offered computer troubleshooting advice & received job offer combining accounting & computing skills

Morphed into research/reference position

75 min in

Everything by design – Lord led me back
Discusses parents' situation

80 min in

JB Difficult point –

ET Most people don't want to come back to small town

Discusses travels in Europe, Latin America

Completed bucket list

Saving money 3 years – trip to Spain

Started saving again, trip to Greece

Who know what shape I will be in when I retire

First few months – had to get used to early closing, not available, making friends again

JB Very involved Lawrence County Historical –

ET 2012 editor journal, Clover Bend Association, local Chamber, African American Gravestone project

Documenting every cemetery Arkansas internet, pictures

85 min in

‘You know, my grandfather always talked about a cemetery down this road’
Over a million in this state
My thing, show respect for elders: farmer, all stones in corner, walkway for the house

90 min in

JB Hill Foundation ?

ET Rosemary Hill, 2004/5, a parent, aggravated nobody knew about Hoxie
Includes all students, African American cemetery
2015 – 50th anniversary celebration – Chamber of Commerce with Governor, MLK Foundation

95 min in

All I wanted
Fayth [Hill] Washington [daughter of Rosemary Hill & fellow Hill Foundation board member]
wanted the Hill Foundation in front, though no listings of any sponsors
Bad feelings over difference of opinion in the matter

Refers to multiple speaking engagements about Hoxie experience, its place in history

100 min in

Notes rich history of Lawrence County - Clover Bend, writer Alice French
Identifies personal hobbies – greeting cards, picture frames, family history to 1852

105 min in

JB Often very hard to accomplish
You’ve been very generous, anything you want to add?

ET Have to credit my dad – no education
When walk into a room, child of God, keep head up
Helped me breaking ice even in school – might have been discriminated against
Just went right on

110 min in

May not drive a Mercedes
Only had second grade, a farmer

JB Powerful message
Do you think being female as much a factor as African American ?

ET Some parts of the country, farther south you go
Say if I go into a bank [Mississippi] applying

When I got out of the navy in 1970 three strikes:

Navy
Women
Color
Ill repute, trouble, runaways

JB As in: judge sent him away?

ET Yes
Even in San Diego, uniform kind of whistle

115 min in

JB How handle?

ET First job clerk-typist manufacturing company
Job I applied for taken
HR person from north east Arkansas
Old home week – interview for another position
Story of working for hippie coming in off road to become treasurer in 1970s
We'll learn together

JB What use GI bill for?

ET Computer science –enrolled Control Data Institute

2 hrs in

Humongous computer – COBOL program
Got greedy
Worked five days a week, evening & Saturday classes
Four years [college] in two
Never do it again – single
Hard, I made it
My COBOL and operations gave me a leg up
Boxes of computers at office
Opened all computers & started using
Put mine together
My boss said – you're the tech specialist, fourth floor

2 hrs, 5 min

After 12 years, friend said come over McDonnell Douglas
There 'til 1985-86, didn't want to move to Mesa, Arizona
Trained over 2000 people

JB Unusual to be woman tech

ET Yes, not without problems
Boss wanted to bring on a guy, split work, that was OK
Guy would make more & become my boss
I would train him

I was sent to fix my boss's computer , talked with boss about new order, fairness

2 hrs, 10 min

Tells of challenges getting teletype technicians at Home Savings [previous position] to hear a woman's diagnosis of machine's problems, her approaches, records of calls to get repairs, script to male colleagues, etc.

If nice, get point across

2 hrs, 15-17 min

JB Close out with thanks

**Second file – phone – poor audio
21 April 2016**

Approx 6 min total

Thank you for follow up
Jo Blatti by telephone w/ Ethel Tompkins of Lawrence County

JB Credited dad with teaching you to walk into any room
He came up early in 20th c – a tough time for many African Americans
Where do you think he got that strength?

ET Long read Bible, Godly way
We would encounter much – not create more difficulties for ourselves

JB Anything else?

ET Do have to say –
Others have said, believe in God, walk in life
Don't get violent

JB Thanks so much