An Interview with

MRS. PEARL T. DUNCAN

May 17, 1978

Interviewed by

Daisy M. Greene

Mississippi
Department of Archives and History
and the
Washington County Library System
Oral History Project:
Greenville and Vicinity

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Scope Note: The Washington County Library System, with assistance from the Mississippi Department of Archives and History, conducted oral history interviews with local citizens. The project interviews took place between 1976 and 1978. The interviewees included long-term residents of the Greenville-Washington County area in their late 50's and older.

May 17, 1978. This is Daisy Greene interviewing Mrs. Pearl T. Duncan for the Mississippi Department of Archives and History and the Washington County Library System. Mrs. Duncan's address is 1530 Kennedy Cove.

Mrs. Duncan, will give me the date and place of your birth?

DUNCAN: I was born during that very historical year in Mississippi, 1927, August 25th at Vicksburg, Mississippi. My mother's maiden name was Katie Lane and my father's name was Edward James Topps. My maiden name was Pearl M. Topps. I was educated in the Greenville Public Schools, having begun my education at the old Number Four School on Hernando Street at the age of 3 years old. From there I went to the old Number Seven School where I completed the fourth grade and then moved to Number Two School in 1936. From there I went to Yerger Junior High across the street from Number Two School on Cleveland Street, from there to Coleman High School where I graduated in 1944.

GREENE: Where did you attend college, Mrs. Duncan?

DUNCAN: I attended college at Knoxville College in Knoxville, Tennessee.

GREENE: How was it that you chose an out of state school?

DUNCAN: One thing, I had not traveled before, and to

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go out of the state seemed like going a long way. I thought that perhaps if I went out of the state, I'd have an opportunity to meet more people from other areas of the United States, thereby my knowledge of people and my acquaintances would have a wider range.

GREENE: I thought Professor McGee had something to do with it.

DUNCAN: Well, not necessarily. Mrs. Holmes, who had also attended Knoxville College, was my inspiration.

GREENE: Did you receive out-of-state aid?

DUNCAN: No, there was no such thing as out of state or in state aid at that time. It was either that your parents forked up the money or you didn't go.

GREENE: I know you are a registered voter. Did you have trouble when you began to vote?

DUNCAN: No, I didn't. No, I had no trouble. All I had to do was pay $2.00 for poll tax.

GREENE: Have you ever served on a Jury?

DUNCAN: Yes, one time.

GREENE: Will you tell me about the case?

DUNCAN: The case involved a young man whom I had taught at one point. He was being tried for a minor crime. I was selected as a juror, but I was dismissed because when they called his name, somehow it registered on my face that I knew him and I was dismissed, so that was my only chance at the Jury.

GREENE: Were you paid for going?

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DUNCAN: Oh, yes.

GREENE: What was the pay?

DUNCAN: I was paid $12.00 a day, for three days.

GREENE: Now, let's talk about your teaching career. Tell me when did you begin.

DUNCAN: I began teaching in the Fall of 1948 at Coleman High School.

GREENE: I remember you taught French. Did you have much trouble recruiting students for the class?

DUNCAN: No, at that time foreign language was very fascinating. We had more students than we had class room space. I had what you call wall-to-wall students. I remember very distinctly in some classes I had as many as forty students. Two or three times I had sixty students in one class.

GREENE: In a foreign language class?

DUNCAN: In a foreign language class. Some learned by listening, some learned by copying and some learned by just rubbing against the other one.

GREENE: Now, what's the regular class enrollment for a foreign language?

DUNCAN: Normally it's a class enrollment of around twenty or less but I find that more was done with the sixty than generally I can do with twenty or less. The students had a greater desire to learn in those crowded conditions, I think, more than they do now with the very pleasant and sparsely populated class room.

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GREENE: What did you tell me about the children learning the French National Anthem?

DUNCAN: Oh, yes, we were learning to sing La Marseillaise, and Coleman at that time did not have a band. At some point before that time somebody had dropped off a couple of drums and one or two horns, and they had a place in the room so we decided that we would get into the spirit of La Marseillaise. We decided that we would sing it and we would beat out the rhythm. So we got the old drum out of the closet. Somebody got on the piano and we began to sing. Back in those days we did not have a band, whenever drums were heard everybody came running. In a few minutes in the front of the school was just crowded with people. They thought it was a parade from somewhere. We had to stop. The principal came in all irate and we had to put the drums up and go back to the lesson.

GREENE: That's the Coleman High on Cleveland Street.

DUNCAN: That's Coleman High on Cleveland Street.

GREENE: Now, who was the principal then?

DUNCAN: Mr. G. P. Maddox was principal then.

GREENE: I understand that you worked with the Homecoming Celebrations at Coleman.

DUNCAN: Oh, yes. That was the highlight of the year, Homecoming Celebrations. This was one activity wherein all students participated, whether they were part of the Homecoming Court or just those who prepared the celebration. This was a

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celebration that not only the teachers and students participated in, but even our community looked forward to it and did quite a bit of work in making Homecoming a very gala affair during the year.

GREENE: What were the objectives?

DUNCAN: The objective of this celebration was two-fold. It gave our students some means of socializing. The object of the Homecoming activities was to raise money in order to get band uniforms, athletic uniforms, instruments or whatever the school needed because at that time the school board provided Coleman with nothing. Whatever Coleman used, Coleman bought and we made this an annual affair. Everybody went out to do everything for Homecoming. We would sell sandwiches, we would buy a dollar box of cookies and make about three dollars from it. We went to the field and picked cotton. Nobody ever picked more than 20 pounds but we would bring home something like $100.00 or $150.00 per day. We would sell almost everything. Anything that moved, we sold it. Each class would try to outdo the other with money and we would raise something like $3,000.00 or $4,000.00 or $5,000.00.

GREENE: Were the children forced to go?

DUNCAN: Oh, no. When we made a trip they were delighted in going. In fact, if there was a conflict of one or two classes going, they would almost fight to see which one would go. They didn't want to wait until the next day.

GREENE: They would have to wait for a scheduled time.

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DUNCAN: Yes, because we couldn't have too many classes out in one day but this, too, was educational because we learned something. I saw a big worm and even though I was a teacher I didn't know what kind of a worm it was. In fact, I didn't even know that we had them and, you know, those students who were in science, they learned quite a bit from that trip, from vegetation, etc. so the trips themselves were educational.

GREENE: Now, there was a queen for each Homecoming. Do you remember the first three or four queens?

DUNCAN: Yes, I remember the first three or four queens. They were very beautiful girls and they were very good representatives.

GREENE: How were they selected?

DUNCAN: The ones at this time were from the class that raised the highest amount of money; the queen would come from that class, but the students would select the queen.

GREENE: What was done to make the dance hall a beautiful place for the Homecoming Queen?

DUNCAN: We would start the very first of the year getting a theme and getting material. Our class clubs would raise money, and we would order the decorations. We would have the - all our activities were held in the gymnasium at Julia Armstrong School. It was the only place that we had. Coleman High unfortunately did not have an auditorium or a gymnasium or much of any place big enough to have anything, so all the activities were held at the Julia Armstrong

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gymnasium. I must say we would decorate it lavishly. It looked like the Waldorf Astoria when we finished.

GREENE: It was very time consuming. Do you think it was worth it?

DUNCAN: It was. For some children it was their first and perhaps their only time that they knew that ballrooms were places of gaiety where beautiful dresses were worn and boys looked their best in dark suits. Most of them were not able to have tuxedos or perhaps had never heard of tuxedos. They didn't know about the big ballrooms across the country and the manners and the behavior necessary for these affairs. I think it taught them something that maybe they have engaged in, or maybe they would never engage in. At least they had a little bit of glory right there.

GREENE: Do you think they miss the homecoming whirl now that schools have been integrated?

DUNCAN: Certainly. Certainly, very much because now that everything is so informal and so cold, students just don't get into anything. They don't let themselves be a part of anything. It's all a formality, there are no genuine feelings. I really think that it was a worth while endeavor. Now-a-days you mention things that are of culture or esthetic value and students don't know what you are talking about. But in those days they could fantasize, or they could dream and they could say, "Well I know what it is like because we did this or that at the time". They would go to any length to get

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their beautiful dresses. They would make them, but they were beautiful and they were colorful and their behavior went along with the setting.

GREENE: Did the queen have maids in her Court?

DUNCAN: Yes. The runner-ups would be maids. I think she would have two, or a maid from each high school class.

GREENE: Do you remember a few of the first queens?

DUNCAN: Yes, I can remember Polly Anne Terry, McBride, (Etheryne McBride).

GREENE: You were a member of the Greenville Teacher's Association. Did you see any benefits of that organization?

DUNCAN: Very much so. Anybody who came along in the pre-integration days or the pre-Civil Rights days will know just what was accomplished by the GTA. When I started teaching, even though I had gone to college, it was not uncommon to ge called by my first name. In fact, that's all we were called by - Pearl or whatever. It made no difference where you were with friends or business people or whatever, you were called by your first name.

The GTA drafted a letter and sent it to the superintendent and expressed our desires as professional people to be given that respect, being called Mister, Mrs. or Miss, whatever the case might be. The first meeting we had after our letter had, I'm sure, been adopted, the superintendent came to the meeting. Everybody was tense because we knew we were going to hear John, George, James or Mary, and he surprised us. He addressed us as professor. Everybody was a professor, every

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woman, every man was professor, so, although we didn't like the idea that everybody was a professor, it was better than being called with no title at all.

GREENE: Did the GTA help in any other way?

DUNCAN: Oh, yes. Not only did we not have the title we didn't have money either according to the work that we did. GTA was instrumental in making known that there was such an inequity between black and white salaries at that time, and after this was made known, and I guess they thought that we meant business, there were some means or some move toward equalizing salaries, although they were not equalized, but certainly black teachers' salaries were improved within the next year.

GREENE: Whose idea was it to organize this Teachers' Association?

DUNCAN: Well, it was Miss Thelma Maddox whose idea it was that the teachers should be organized.

GREENE: Do you remember the date?

DUNCAN: It was 1954.

GREENE: Mrs. Duncan, do you know of any superstitious beliefs of black people?

DUNCAN: Yes, they are numerous but one or two. The one that stays clear in my mind is about the woodpecker. If a woodpecker pecks on your house somebody will die, and, you know, in the spring of the year they will always peck. I wonder why in my house everybody wasn't dead. Another one was when a bad storm was coming all you had to do was to run out in the yard

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and turn an axe, the sharpened end up and as the storm passed over that axe it would split, therefore the storm wouldn't do any damage to your house.

GREENE: I should have asked you this earlier. When you began teaching was there a dress code in the school system?

DUNCAN: Yes, definitely, because we believed that somehow a person looks has a great effect on the way he acts, and a school was a place for teaching more than just text books. You were supposed to teach a child how to live in society and how to get along with others within the society. We had a dress code. Our young ladies were to wear certain clothes that would be appropriate for the class room, and would not detract from the class room activities or would it cause any excitement anywhere else. They were to dress modestly, not too dressy and not to lax. The young men, so that girls would admire them - dressed accordingly.

GREENE: Now, you will be retiring at the end of this year. What is outstanding in your teaching career?

DUNCAN: Well, I have a lot of things outstanding. In fact, every day was almost outstanding, but I don't think this has happened before, where one teacher - unless it was in one of these one-room school houses in the rural - where one teacher in a system like Greenville had been moved along with her initial class and followed them as homeroom teacher from seventh grade through twelfth grade. I never wrote a homeroom roll because after so many years I knew them backwards and

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forward, and they never dropped out and they never left. The same ones came back year after year until they graduated and some of them were reluctant about leaving then because I wasn't leaving.

GREENE: Which class was that?

DUNCAN: That was the Class of 1954, and incidentally, I have taught their children and am teaching some of their grandchildren now.

GREENE: That's marvelous.

DUNCAN: So had they not gone out of school I would not be able to teach their children.

GREENE: Who were some in that class?

DUNCAN: Well, some in that class around here now are postman Eugene Parker, Henry Bishop, Gaston Young, policeman, J. D. Mitchell, Jerome Myles, Jim Nelson and Henry Womack, Ph.D at Michigan State.

GREENE: You said you missed something.

DUNCAN: Yes, the Junior-Senior prom. That was something that all kids looked forward to. The prom was conducted in such a manner that we didn't have any discipline problems. Everybody came to have fun, everybody had fun and incidentally, the parents would come and they would all marvel at their youngsters swirling around on the floor with their beautiful dresses and the young men so neatly dressed. This was another time that we went all out to decorate. We gave anybody's ball room competition and as I said, the behavior of the students would go right along with the setting. They

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didn't want their dresses mussed, they didn't want their decorations torn down so they acted very nicely and all rules of etiquette were observed at that time. I think the prom too had something to do with the type of education, the value that students placed on education. Another thing, students, I believe, stayed in school so that they would have an opportunity to attend the Junior Senior prom. No one under the eleventh grade was allowed, even as a guest.

GREENE: Who sponsored this?

DUNCAN: Well, the Junior class sponsors. The Junior Class and their sponsors were always in charge of the Junior-Senior prom.

GREENE: They were taxed about how much?

DUNCAN: Oh, maybe $5.00 to $10.00 a year for the prom and this would very amply buy all of the decorations, provide a band, and some students got an opportunity to see how they could dance not by records but with a real live band, and refreshments.

GREENE: Do you remember any of the bands that were employed for that occasion?

DUNCAN: Yes. We used to employ Roy Huddleston and the Green Tops and a band out of Vicksburg, the Red Tops, and we had one or two others. Whether we had the Red Tops or the Green Tops we had the tops.

GREENE: Was there any door crashing?

DUNCAN: No. No door crashing. We didn't have

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anybody who was improperly dressed or who was not invited crashing the door. In fact, you wouldn't even have them out on the campus. It was not necessary to have the policemen or anybody. You'd just have somebody at the door. Sometime a student would get a little warm, I don't know romantically or what, and would want to go out for air but we'd open the door and let the air come in to them, and they'd go back and dance. Other than that, you had no door crashing.

There was one prom that we can recall had a failure, light failure, and those lights were out about an hour. We couldn't get them back on for about an hour, and all the young people were on the floor dancing and the mothers were around. You know, incidentally, at the Armstrong School the gym was sunken. All the spectators sat around. There were four stairs that led down into the gym, one at each corner. When the lights went out, I don't know if the mothers and fathers covered the stairs but although they stayed out about an hour nobody went outside. However, I think a few kisses were stolen while the lights were out, but there was no chaos and nobody was out of place when the lights came on.

GREENE: Were you in charge that year?

DUNCAN: I was in charge and I, of course, went to the entrance, but, as I said, there was no need to cover that because the parents had the other part covered.

GREENE: How does that compare with entertainments given now?

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DUNCAN: I don't really sponsor or particiate in any entertainment now, because I have gotten older and I don't think I could stand it. I do know that you must have a policeman, or you have to have a policeman somewhere around, and you must have men, strong men at the door and then sometimes it's hard to contain them.

GREENE: You are retiring rather early, Mrs. Duncan?

DUNCAN: Yes, by some it is considered early, but the requirements have been met - thirty years of teaching. I feel, and, of course you know, I had to be a certain age in order to begin. Thirty years with my chosen career I believe I have given my best and, as you know, anything that lasts thirty years or longer is not so effective in the thirtieth year as it was in the first year. I believe I will do myself a service and also the students by giving the best, and when I begin to wane get out of it.

GREENE: Mrs. Duncan, did either of your parents tell you anything about your grandparents?

DUNCAN: Yes, I can recall a little bit of history concerning my family a little bit of the family tree, you would say. My great-grandmother was Minerva Jones. At one time she owned what is now the very famous National Park in Vicksburg. She and her husband owned the land before the Civil War days. During the Civil War the government seized much of the land, and she sold some of it. After the war there was a still a lot of it left, but not nearly as much as she possessed before then.

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If you recall the Waterway Experiment Station located in Vicksburg ---

GREENE: Yes.

DUNCAN: It's located on Hall's Ferry Road in Jonestown, a section that was called Jonestown for my great-grandmother.

GREENE: What was the name of the road?

DUNCAN: Hall's Ferry Road.

GREENE: Spell it.

DUNCAN: H-a-l-l-'s F-e-r-r-y - Hall's Ferry Road. It's there now. It begins where Cherry Street ends. The Waterway Experiment Station is located on Hall's Ferry Road. This is part of land that my great-grandmother owned. It was sold to the state government, I guess. Coming back toward town, all of that land was seized by the government at that time. After the Civil War, as a result, she was left with a lot less land than she had before the Civil War.

GREENE: Is this your paternal grandmother or your maternal grandmother?

DUNCAN: This was my maternal grandmother, and by the way, her father's picture is hanging in the old Court House Museum in Vicksburg now.

My great aunt who was the last survivor of my great-grandmother's children passed this along to me. She and her mother, her brothers and her sisters all worked to clear the land in the National Park.

GREENE: How many children were there?

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DUNCAN: She had about twelve or fourteen children.

GREENE: We omitted something, Mrs. Duncan. There were several class reunions that coincided with the Greenville Travel Club Homecoming.

DUNCAN: Yes.

GREENE: Fill me in on that.

DUNCAN: Yes. The Class of 1944 was very much in the celebration. We reserved a suite at the Downtowner for two nights and we entertained our classmates who came back, the Class of 1944.

GREENE: How many returned?

DUNCAN: Well, not too many - about eight returned. We have about eight who live in Greenville now. Originally there were thirty-five students in the class.

GREENE: Who returned?

DUNCAN: Lewis Neal and his wife, formerly Georgia Darrris from Chicago; Earline Land, Ardell Clark, Pecola Crayton, Priscilla Lance, who is a school supervisor in Chicago. Glennie Thompson and Overzenia Stephens came from Memphis; John Ethel Watts, Cleveland, Ohio and Charles Patterson were here also.

GREENE: I remember most of those.

(End of Interview)

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August 19, 1978.

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