

Jessie Hill Wright: — the money and that's where she bought the land. And she bought the land for the school, but by the time she got the land bought and everything, the Rosenwald fund ran out and she couldn't build the school. So the church built the church on the school lot, and then I went down to keep them from tearing the church down, because if they had ever torn the church down, that land would've gone back to the giver. And I had a hard time trying to tell them that they couldn't do it, so I went to town and got the deeds to keep them from tearing it down. Because if they'd torn it down, then we wouldn't have had any place for that. And that's the main reason I'm trying to keep it up while it's there. And that's the deeds to the church.

Paul Ortiz: Oh, I see.

Jessie Hill Wright: The old church and they says if it's ever torn down, it'll go back to the—

Paul Ortiz: Oh, I see.

Jessie Hill Wright: I believe that's it, right there.

Paul Ortiz: So, Mrs. Wheelis was working for the Rosenwald fund?

Jessie Hill Wright: Yeah. And if she had gotten the land before this fund ran out, she would've been able to build a school on that lot. That's what she's doing to build a school. And people sold peanuts and anything they could sell and gave her the money, and she bought that acre of land out there to put that school on.

Paul Ortiz: And this is Nebraska?

Jessie Hill Wright: Nebraska.

Paul Ortiz: Nebraska Church.

Jessie Hill Wright: That's right.

Paul Ortiz: And school.

Jessie Hill Wright: Well, it was just a church, really a church. And we called it the school because she taught school in the church.

Paul Ortiz: Oh, I see.

Jessie Hill Wright: She taught school in that church. That's where we went to school, in the church.

Paul Ortiz: Oh, this is really an important document. And now, this was started in, it says 1900, or this is when the one acre of land—

Jessie Hill Wright: That's it, that's the same. That's where that old church is on that, that's the old church. They celebrated the 100th birth not even too long ago.

Paul Ortiz: Oh, I see. Yeah, 30 July, 1900.

Jessie Hill Wright: Right. But now, that's not the land that she bought, that's a church.

Paul Ortiz: The church land?

Jessie Hill Wright: But that's the one that I'm remodeling. And I told them since they had the church over there, then we would take that for the Wheelis Center. It's two churches there.

Paul Ortiz: And Mrs. Wheelis was working with—

Jessie Hill Wright: Ms. Wheelis doesn't have anything really to do with that. I'm saying she bought the land where the church is now. Not that church, where the other church is.

Paul Ortiz: The other church, Nebraska?

Jessie Hill Wright: Nebraska, it's still Nebraska. But see, she was teaching in the church and she wanted to give us a school. And she bought the land to build a school on. But by the time she got the land paid for, she got sick and the Rosenwald fund ran out and we didn't get our school. So the church, when they came down there, they wanted to build another church because that church was falling down, and they built another nice brick church on the side over there. And I got here just in time, they was fixing to tear that one down and push it aside. And I asked them not to do it and let me remodel it.

Paul Ortiz: Oh, that's great. She never had a chance to build that?

Jessie Hill Wright: No, she didn't get to build a school.

Paul Ortiz: Well, during the '40s and '50s, did you have a chance to take part in other political activities that were happening with the Tuskegee Civic Association?

Jessie Hill Wright: No, I didn't ever take part in that.

Paul Ortiz: Did you agree with what they were doing or disagree?

Jessie Hill Wright: Well, I can't say too much about it because I didn't get to go to meetings and everything, I

didn't really know what was happening. So I wouldn't know whether to disagree or agree.

Paul Ortiz: Would people at the institute talk about those kinds of issues, about what was happening with the—

Jessie Hill Wright: Well, they discussed it from time to time when Mr. Gomillion was here. Gomillion was instrumental in getting a lot of stuff done. And he would have meetings and sometimes we'd get to go to his meetings, but you wouldn't get to take part, you'd just be there.

Paul Ortiz: Would there be meetings where people would get up and lecture or give talks and other people, you would listen?

Jessie Hill Wright: Right. They used to have meetings at the churches and all to plan their strategy and things like that. People used to come from everywhere because it used to be all out on the lawn and all on the outside and everything.

Paul Ortiz: Did you go to one of the meetings where they talked about starting the boycott of the downtown businesses?

Jessie Hill Wright: I wasn't at the meeting but I heard about it. I heard about it.

Paul Ortiz: Now, I'm sure that people probably talked a lot about that.

Jessie Hill Wright: Oh yeah. They knew what they was going to do and they had it all planned and the strategy and everything.

Paul Ortiz: Was there a disagreement over that strategy or did you think that that strategy was maybe too much at that time?

Jessie Hill Wright: Well, my personal feeling, I just didn't understand and I thought maybe they was going to get— See, when you think you fixing to get hurt, I'm always ready to step back. So I didn't understand and didn't know what was going to be the outcome. But when I look at it now, if they hadn't done what they did do, I imagine we'd still been back there, afraid to walk across the street. So I admire the people that were able to take part, but I didn't ever take part in it because I was usually doing something else.

Paul Ortiz: It seems like that improved conditions, because before that you said that—

Jessie Hill Wright: A lot of things you couldn't do and wasn't supposed to do. And sometimes the people, the stores and things would charge more than they were supposed to charge because you couldn't do any better. But after the boycott and everything went through, it changed it, that's when the change came.

Paul Ortiz: What were some things that you couldn't do before the boycott that you wanted to do?

Jessie Hill Wright: Well, a lot of places, you couldn't go in. You could go to the back door but you couldn't go in the front door. And after they decided that's what they was going to do, we had a lot of the students that went to integrate certain counters. You go to a place where you wanted to eat, you couldn't eat.

Paul Ortiz: What would you do if you went to a place and you were trying to eat or something and they said, "We're not going to serve you in the front entrance, you have to go in the back?" What would you do?

Jessie Hill Wright: I didn't go in the front door, I just went on home if I didn't want to go. Because I guess if I was said, I wasn't a pioneer to push. So if they say, "You couldn't come in," I just didn't go in, because that's the way I was taught. Daddy and them would always say, "If you don't get yourself out the front, you don't get yourself beat up." See, a lot of people would go and they get them beat up because we had, I remember Sammy Young, they told him he couldn't. Fella got killed or that's the one they talk about all the time with the Civil Rights thing. The man told him he couldn't go in the restroom and I don't know what happened, they never did say what happened. But I know he got killed, that's all we know, that he got killed. And when something like that happened, you're not going to force your way. I wouldn't. Maybe somebody else would, but I've never been a forceful person.

Jessie Hill Wright: Now, if they told me I couldn't come in the front door and I didn't want to go to the back door, I would come home. There's a little place up here, the side the road, my husband used to go by there when he come home from teaching, he'd go around to the, we stopped saying back because it looked bad. He'd go around to the side, it was still the back. And the girl in there was a Colored girl, cooking, and she would sell him some stuff out the back door. That's where he got his nice stuff if he wanted it, seafood and everything where they used to serve it up the road there. And he'd bring it home Saturday night, but he had to go down to the back to get it. He couldn't go in the front door and buy it and take it out. That was just a way of life because young people now don't know what they have. It's beautiful, they never had to do that. And they sometimes they don't believe you had to do it, but you did.

Paul Ortiz: Those are things that really happened.

Jessie Hill Wright: Yeah, they happened. As I said, it was a way of life and was a part of it and I don't think we worried about it so much because that's the way, when I came here, it was like that. When I was born, that's what daddy and them was doing. I thought that was the way it supposed to be and it never did really. Because we've been in places, standing up in there and they said, "We don't serve so-and-so's in here." And I just turned around, going back out the way I was going. We went one place out and was going to California, I don't remember, it was out of Texas someplace. And we went in the place and went up to a counter and we sat down. And then some other people that, I don't know nationalities per se, if they're White or if they're Black, that's the way I go.

Jessie Hill Wright: I can tell an American Colored person, I think, if I look at him long enough. Sometimes you can't tell him. But those people came in there and sat down and the man made them get up. And I've never felt so bad in all the days of my life because I've always been the person that they made get up. I don't know

what nationality they was, I never could find out. But they told them, "You don't eat there. You get up and go back over there." And they made them go back over, way over on the side to a table. That's where we had been going all the time, but they told us we could eat up there and I felt bad because they made them move. So then I guess that's the way they felt when they used to make us move.

Jessie Hill Wright: They definitely made them move and I've never found out, because we were just traveling. Because if I hadn't been traveling, I'd want to go back by there and find out why. But that really happened and they got up because they told them they wasn't going to serve them and they went on back over, way over. They had a table way over in the back and they went over there and sat to that table. And my husband, I said, "What happened?" He said, "Well, I just don't know." I said, "What kind of people?" He didn't know either.

Jessie Hill Wright: He didn't know whether they were Mexicans or what. But evidently, it was one of the other races. It wasn't a White race, it was a race that I didn't know. But I could feel then how, I hoped they felt as bad for me as when they used to make the Negroes get up. So I don't know what was happening. But we sat there and ate our little stuff and came on out and they had to go way over there in the corner. I don't know, different rules, different folks.

Paul Ortiz: Yeah. Did you have other experiences with segregation when you would travel with your husband?

Jessie Hill Wright: We didn't stop at too many places when we found out we couldn't stop. We'd always go, you'd have to go all the way to Texas in Texarkana before you could start going in places. Because most of these other places, you'd have to go around to the back to get it from here to Texas. We would always go through Texas and soon we'd get out, going out and then we always eat there.

Paul Ortiz: Would you prepare before you traveled?

Jessie Hill Wright: Oh yes, I'd always prepare. I'd have my paraphernalia in there now, we had a stove and all the equipments, the little gas stove. And we'd go into the grocery stores and buy what you going buy and then go. Now, you had to be careful about that, too. You couldn't stop on a side road anywhere. You had to make sure that that was the place you could stop, because see they didn't allow you to stop on the side and cook. They'd run you out of there sometimes. So we'd go on as far as we could go and then I would fix a lot of food before I leave home and put it in the car with me, like soups and things like that, that you could put in thermos bottles and take it like that.

Paul Ortiz: You said that the first place that you could actually stop would be Texarkana?

Jessie Hill Wright: Yes, the cafes there, you could stop in and they would let you eat there. But the other place, you might could eat and you might not. We used to go places and buy gas and my husband asked the man he was buying the gas at, "I'd like to have some breakfast here," and you're right there by the cafe. He said, "If I buy my gas here, can I go there and eat?" "Oh yes, yes, yes. You can eat, you can eat." So you fill up

with gas and went over there and lady told us, "Uh-huh, you don't eat here." Said, "No, we can't serve you here." And the waitress or the waiter, waitress, she's a waitress. She felt so bad and she really asked her boss lady, said, "Please let me give them something because I know they hungry. They just come from California."

Jessie Hill Wright: She said, "What did I tell you? I told you we don't serve so-and-so's in here." So my husband said, "Well, will you please give me a cup of coffee and I'll take it outside and drink it?" And she said, "Well yeah, I guess you can give him some coffee," so they gave us some coffee but I couldn't drink that coffee. I was afraid to drink it. I poured mine out because I didn't drink coffee nohow. I was just afraid to drink it, that was my fault. Because if a person don't want you to do something, they ain't going to give you nothing clean and they don't need to make themselves sick. And that's what we were always afraid of, that if you went someplace and people didn't want you to have and they gave it to you anyway, just take it but don't eat it.

Jessie Hill Wright: Because somebody had said that sometime they drop it on the floor and pick it up and put it on your plate because they don't want you eating there. It might not have been true, but that was what people would say. And so I just poured my coffee out. CJ poured his out there, he pretended to drink it, because he didn't drink coffee anyway. But he was just determined to try to get something since he was in there. It was hard, real hard, but you make it. And as I say, if you know can't do certain things, then you don't push yourself to do them until they said it's all right to come in.

Jessie Hill Wright: Now, when we went back there those last two times, we didn't have any trouble stopping any place except Mississippi. We came by one place in Mississippi and they said, "We still don't serve y'all." "Okay, miss," we went on. Because I'm not going to stand and argue if you tell me what you don't do, because there's no point in getting yourself hurt, not when you're by yourself. If it's a whole group, I'm with you, but I'm not a loner.

Paul Ortiz: But you went to a place in Mississippi and they still wouldn't serve you?

Jessie Hill Wright: They said they got some place in Mississippi now you can't eat. I don't have to do no traveling now, but somebody told me that here about three or four weeks ago. But they didn't say where, they just said it was in Mississippi. We was talking in general and they say, "Yeah, there's a place in Mississippi now you still, they don't want you served." But most of the people had always talked about going to the big cities and I wanted to go to the big city because they was always saying that in New York you can go any place you want to go and eat. And those people live in New York, would come back and tell me. So I want to go to New York because you can eat any place you want to go. My mother and I went to New York one weekend and we went in one of the stores and they shopping in there. You could shop in there but you couldn't buy no food in there.

Jessie Hill Wright: So she said, "Oh Lord, that orange juice looks so good and I want some of it." So I looked at her and she looked back at me. She said, "I'm going to go up here and get me some orange juice. So we got in the line, there was a Colored girl there, and she says, "I'd like to have some of this juice." The Colored

girl say, "Go down on that end of the bar." I didn't understand that. "If the juice is here, why I got to walk all the way down to the end of the bar to get the juice?" So we walked down to the end of the bar, she had juice. And she said, "May I have two glasses of orange juice, please?" She said, "Go back up there to the other end of the bar."

Jessie Hill Wright: So I looked at her, she looked at me, she said, "I don't believe they going to serve me, but just because they told me to go back, I'm going to go back and see what kind of so and so she going tell." So we went back up to the thing and she said, "I told you to go down there," and she walked on down that way. So we never did get that juice. Went down there four times, this one twice and that one twice and we never did get that juice, because when we go down there to her, she'd do one of these numbers.

Jessie Hill Wright: They never would serve us in that store and when we went out, she was telling somebody, "Oh no, you can't do nothing but buy the clothes." And I said, "You can't eat no food in there, they don't serve you in there. They'll serve everybody but you, they ain't going to serve you." They didn't serve us. And so when they came back telling me about New York, I told me, "Tell me nothing about New York. Y'all can't eat." See, they wanted to make you think that, "Oh boy, you can come to New York and do anything." They couldn't tell me anything. I said, "Uh-huh, because we went there and couldn't get served." They said, "Oh, y'all went to the wrong place." I said, "Well, why didn't you tell us that?"

Paul Ortiz: Even though they didn't have signs, there was—

Jessie Hill Wright: No, wasn't no signs. They had to take the signs down, they just wouldn't serve you. But see, the signs had to come down according to the law, they couldn't put the signs up. But now, the post office, the grocery store and wherever else everybody went, I couldn't understand that either. That disturbed me, because everybody can go there. Everybody goes there and you together, but you just can't eat together. No, they don't want you eating with them. I hope it's over, but sometimes I wonder.

Jessie Hill Wright: And if you're not real careful, 20 years from now, y'all know what we was talking about if you don't watch yourself. Now, this didn't last for five good years, really, the good stuff. Because they were afraid for five years that if they did anything, they'd get in trouble. And so we discussed it with the students. I said, "We dropping back, you not going to step further." King left and you ain't moving nowhere, so we haven't moved since he left, really. Haven't gone another step further.

Paul Ortiz: But you think that there was about five years?

Jessie Hill Wright: It was five good years, those five good years. Because the people, they looked like they wanted you to come in, they made you feel wanted. And then after five years time, they started saying, "You can come on in here," but you wasn't as welcome as you used to be. And you can find that now in a lot of places you go.

Paul Ortiz: You think that those five good years were during the 1960s?

Jessie Hill Wright: Yes, in the '60s. Yeah, in the '60s, five years in the '60s and they start. It is easing back. I don't know whether anybody's knows it or not, but it's easing back. I heard some kids, some younger people on TV said they going to work with it, they ain't going to let it go no further than it is, they going to work with it. But they were talking about the baby boomers and this generation now you got, and then this other man was 80 years old. And the baby boomers and the other group, three groups on there was talking. But I disagree in a way. They talk about social security. Well, that was our only hope for getting old and knowing you got a dollar coming in. Now the young man tells me he is putting money in here for me to get Social Security check.

Jessie Hill Wright: And it's really bad because so many times that's why they take the check, because they think it's theirs. But they don't give me credit for putting anything in there. So if I put my money in there, where did my money go? And they were saying on TV the other night, "We are taking care." Ain't nobody taking care of us. We put our money in and started putting in, people work 30 and 40 years. They put their money in there and they put their money in savings account and that money made money. Because a lot of us sent when we got ready to retire to see how much money we had in there. And some of them had good money in there. But the people now saying, "No, no, you getting our money. We paying for you to get your social security check." And that's the way they feel, they really feel that way.

Paul Ortiz: Oh, Mrs. Wright, I was going to ask you a couple more questions about Tuskegee. Now, you said before you lived up here you were living—

Jessie Hill Wright: On Gregory Street.

Paul Ortiz: On Gregory Street.

Jessie Hill Wright: That's back up on the campus, near the campus there.

Paul Ortiz: And at that time, were your children in school yet?

Jessie Hill Wright: Yeah, I had one son and he was in school.

Paul Ortiz: And where was he going to school at?

Jessie Hill Wright: Tuskegee Institute.

Paul Ortiz: At the institute. Was that when the school was on campus?

Jessie Hill Wright: Yes.

Paul Ortiz: Were you involved or did you ever get involved in PTA activities?

Jessie Hill Wright: No, I didn't.

Paul Ortiz: What was that part of the town like on that street, that neighborhood? Was that a neighborhood that primarily Black people lived in?

Jessie Hill Wright: Yes, all Black. Yeah, all Black lived in that community.

Paul Ortiz: Would you call that a good neighborhood to raise children in during that time?

Jessie Hill Wright: Yes, I thought it was good because as I said, everybody knew everybody's children. And I was working on the campus at that time and on Saturday evening, the children want to go to the movie and sometime they'd want to slip in, so I got me a group of them and I had them working. They'd come over here, open popcorn boxes and fill popcorn boxes. I had about four of them that'd come over and work for me and they would get that ticket into the movie.

Jessie Hill Wright: And lady said she didn't know how her child was getting in the movie, so she came over there to try to find out. And when I told her, she was so happy. She said, "He leaves home, talking about he going to his job." And so, she came evening. I said, "Well, that's what." And I was standing right there and let some open the boxes and some fill them. And then when they get through, then they could go in the movie. I'd give them money to go in the movie and then give them popcorn.

Jessie Hill Wright: So they had the popcorn and the ticket to get in the movie. They were going to slip in anyway and I didn't want them slipping in. I mean, you could control them and you could talk to them and you could get them down there to work and the parents would be so glad that you helped them out, they wouldn't know what to do. But see, that isn't like that now. Nobody keeps— I had a gang of them and I don't know, they got mad. One sat up there about something and when out there and broke glass all in front of the newsstand, door, they just got bad. I found them and I stood out there and made them pick it up, every bit of it and clean it up, and then called their parents and told them about it and they were just as happy as they could be. Nobody got angry because everybody took care of everybody.

Paul Ortiz: Was there a part of Tuskegee at that time where you didn't want your children going?

Jessie Hill Wright: Not that I know of, because it was pretty open and nice then. Every place was all right for them to go and the parents would go and the children would go. Because at night when the little guys would get ready to stay out, like guys going to sit around and talk and everything, well, I was interested in knowing where mine was talking. There's a step over there, man had a dry cleaner, had them long steps over there. So I told him, "I tell what you do, you can stay out long as you want to." And I went over and asked the man if it'd be all right for him to sit on the front of his steps down there as long as they wanted to and didn't keep no noise, so I tell him not to keep noise.

Jessie Hill Wright: So they sat there for years, the gang. And they just found out about two years ago why they were sitting there. See, my son didn't tell them, he just said, "I tell y'all, let's go over here." And every night I'd peep out there and they was still sitting there, but they didn't keep a lot of noise to wake up to

people. And sometime they still there until twelve, one o'clock at night, sitting up there, talking, but I could see them. And they all got together here about two, three years ago and I told them, I said, "Did y'all ever know why y'all was sitting on steps? They tried to beat my son up now." Said, "Man, why didn't you tell us?" But he didn't tell them, so that's what they would do, sit on that step.

Jessie Hill Wright: And on Saturdays, then her little boy wanted to drink beer. So I always fixing it so my son couldn't buy no beer by his self. He'd have to put his money with somebody if he bought beer, because I wouldn't give him enough to buy a beer. We'd give him enough to buy a Coca-Cola, something like that. So then I would go over sometime and buy them a whole case of drinks or two cases of drinks and take them to that little party where they was going, and let them go there and they'd drink them. They didn't never know where they was getting the drinks from. I would tell them man, so we'd sell them drinks and that kept him from drinking beer until they got old enough to drink beer.

Jessie Hill Wright: I told him if he had a quarter, he couldn't buy no beer, because beer cost more than a quarter. So we worked together, tried anyway. They have just had a world tour, had a trip around the world for four months and they just got back in May. And he works at Pittsburgh, the community college in Pittsburgh. And his wife works at the University of Pittsburgh. They have two children and they graduated from college this year. And I guess that's the end of my road.

Paul Ortiz: If you had to sum up your life and think about what have been the most important things to you in your life and would've been, say, perhaps the most inspirational things that have kept you going, what would they be?

Jessie Hill Wright: Well, I've always liked to work. I think working with the students and getting involved with things like that, I've enjoyed that very much. And I used to tell the students that work was beautiful. And don't fight work, because if you fight it, it'll fight you back and beat you up every time. That's been my philosophy of life.