Interview with Ferdie Louise Walker and Archie Lee Walker

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Tuskegee (Ala.)

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Behind the Veil: Documenting African-American Life in the Jim Crow South
An oral history project to record and preserve the living memory of African American life during the age of legal segregation in the American South, from the 1890s to the 1950s.

ORIGINAL PROJECT

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CENTER FOR DOCUMENTARY STUDIES
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DUKE UNIVERSITY
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BEHIND THE VEIL:
DOCUMENTING AFRICAN AMERICAN LIFE
IN THE JIM CROW SOUTH
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW WITH:
FERDIE LOUISE WALKER
AND
ARCHIE LEE WALKER

JULY 17, 1994
TUSKEgee UNIVERSITY
TUSKEgee, ALABAMA

INTERVIEWED BY:
PAUL ORTIZ
FERDIE WALKER: ... backgrounds are very different even though some of our, parts of our lives are similar in similar areas. So, whatever way you want to go.

PAUL ORTIZ: Well, Mrs. Walker, would you tell me about the area that you grew up in and about your childhood.

FERDIE WALKER: I grew up in Fort Worth, Texas, and I was one of two children. One of two girls. My mother was a registered nurse. My father was a dining car waiter for the Texas and Pacific Railroad.

PAUL ORTIZ: What part of Fort Worth did you grow up in?

FERDIE WALKER: The east side. Fort Worth was separated for black people into lots of different areas because many black people lived on each side of town, but I lived on the east side which was really a relatively poor neighborhood. The south side was where most of the associates were. There was one black high school. So all of the black kids from all over town went to one black high school. And there were elementary schools in each section of town for black children. I never had a white teacher in my life, until I got in college. So my education was
predominately black. My mom was the public school nurse which meant that she had usually the three months off in the summer. And in the summer she did domestic work like housekeeping and so forth in order to augment her income. Because at that time I believe in the whole state of Texas, but at least where we lived the black public school employees made about half as much money as the white public school employees did. And it was that way up until 1940-something or other when the Gilmer Akin Law was passed which equalized salaries. So if black school nurses and black school teachers made $64 a month, then white school teachers and white nurses made at least twice that much. Now in my home we always had an extended family. My father's mother lived with us until she died which was before my birth in 1928. Then later as I, I guess maybe I was seven years old, my mother's father had lived with us and he died, living in our home. We had my mother's sister lived with us. So there was always some other member of the family who could help take care of the children. My mother's father was a farmer who had lived in Tioga and Melissa, Texas until he was much older in years. Then he came to live with us. He ate one meal a week with us which was really very important in my life and that was Sunday morning. He had breakfast and he prayed a long time. And of course, we had to stay out all night. Minnie, my sister and I peeked over the chairs at each other and kind of made eyes and all kinds of weird stuff, because prayer went on for a long time. He was killed. This is my mother's
father. He was very independent and didn't want to be bothered with us very much. And even though we'd get in the car and go to church regularly, he would never ride with us. He always got up earlier than we did and he walked from the east side to the south side to church and came back. He lived in what we called the garage apartment which was above our garage. He was killed walking across a trestle. He couldn't get off the trestle in time and the end of the train caught him and knocked him off the trestle. I started out telling you that my mother did domestic work in the summertime. She cleaned and cooked for white people who lived not too far from us and with that money she felt that her daughters needed to know some really fine things about life and that was when piano lessons and dancing and the things that she felt were important for young people to have. Our life was completely separate from the lives of white people. We could go a whole week and never see any white people - until we started riding the bus to school. And I guess maybe my emote from that experience is as a black little girl were in riding the bus. It was at that time that we were supposed to sit at the back of the bus and I knew that. And ordinarily I got on the bus and went on back to the back. And I remember one day I got on the bus and I did not stop in the front section, but just behind that section where you go out the back door I sat in the front seat there. And the bus driver got up and came back to tell me that I had to move out of that seat because I had to go all the way back to the back.
And it made me so angry. Now I wasn't really a rebellious kid, you know. I followed the rules. I never got in any trouble, but that day, I was just mad. So I got up and I did not go to the back of the bus I just stood in the stairwell that you had to walk out of to get off the bus. And he was determined that he was going to make me go and sit down. I was determined I wasn't going to do it. So I just stood there. And he finally said, well, I'm going to have to go get a policeman and so, you know, I just stood there. And I knew that if my mother knew that I had acted out, that's what it was called, she would really be very upset with me. But, you know, I just stood there and when the bus stopped, I just got off and I walked home. I just didn't want to do what he said do. And that's about the most rebellious that I was.

PAUL ORTIZ: How old were you at that time?

FERDIE WALKER: I must have been about 9 or 10. My method of getting along with everybody was to just shut up and if they didn't bother me I didn't bother them. So now you can ask me something else.

PAUL ORTIZ: Now you mentioned that your grandfather was a very important part of your life when he'd come by at least once a week. Do you remember stories that he told about his own upbringing?
FERDIE WALKER: No. No, I do not and I do not remember stories that my mother told me about her growing up. Mother was one of twelve children. There were three boys and nine girls in her family and we were very close to those sisters and brothers. And we always spent like Thanksgiving dinner, Christmas dinner, even at our house or over in Dallas or down in Tioga. I remember once a year we went down to the place where my mother was born which was Melissa, Texas, and we went to what they called a main meeting. And we went from Fort Worth which was maybe 30 miles or 40 miles. It was close to Denton, Texas. That may be something that you have heard about. And, we all go there once a year. They have this big meal on the grounds at their church that they grew up in. And, then after our folks moved from the rural areas to town, well, we were mostly between Dallas and Fort Worth and some relatives were in Ardmore, Oklahoma, and Springer, Oklahoma, and around those areas. And we always visited them. But I can't remember stores and that is what you asked me about, from my grandparents.

PAUL ORTIZ: Now you grew up on the east side of Fort Worth. Did you go to church on the east side?

FERDIE WALKER: Uh uh. Went to church on the south side. Went to the same church. It was Methodist Episcopal Church.
Saint Andrews and it's still is Saint Andrews at this time. I was just there not too long ago. And that's the same church that we started in. That changed locations. All of the locations for Saint Andrews Church were on the south side and they still are, but yet we went south side to church and we did go to church. I remember when I decided I was too old. I didn't want to go to church any more and I got up one Sunday morning and I told my mother, I said, I'm grown now and I'm not going to church any more. My mother read us psychology books ( ) and somehow it must have told her don't challenge these weird kids, just say "okay". So she said "okay", you don't have to go. You can cook dinner. Well, we were having chicken for dinner and it was a whole chicken and I didn't know how to cut it up. And I spent that whole morning trying to figure out how to get those legs and wings off that chicken while everybody else was gone to church. Well, needless to say I didn't decide not to go to church any more.

PAUL ORTIZ: I see. ( ) experience for you.

FERDIE WALKER: Yes, it really was and that was the same way it was with her learning how to talk heart to heart rather than to spank. And I wished she'd get out that belt and use it and shut up.

PAUL ORTIZ: Now you said that there was a difference in the
black community in the east side and the black community on the south side. Can you explain the difference? Was there people, occupations?

FERDIE WALKER: Well, yes, as far as occupations were concerned. The black people who lived on the east side did the more menial kinds of work.

ARCHIE WALKER: Blue collar community.

FERDIE WALKER: Most of the black people who lived on the south side were professional people. School teachers and principals, and so forth. They had bigger houses. They had better houses. And the name on the south side for black people than the black people on the east side. We lived next to the railroad tracks. There was only one block between my house and the railroad track. And I guess that's one of the things I do remember about my grandfather was his telling us that we had to help the hobos because when the freight trains came through our community they would get off and come up that street on Second Street is where we lived and they would get off and come up the street and they'd knock on the doors looking for food. And they were willing to work for it.

ARCHIE WALKER: Do you know what hoboes are?
PAUL ORTIZ: Yeah, people who rode the rails.

FERDIE WALKER: Yeah. And grandpa said we should help them because they wanted to work for it. So we always made sandwiches if we didn't have something left over from another meal and gave it to them.

PAUL ORTIZ: Was there a change in the tender of life during the depression? Of course, you grew up in it.

FERDIE WALKER: Yeah. I was born in '28. So, the depression is an era that I can't remember too much about, because both of my parents worked. They had jobs and they always had jobs.

PAUL ORTIZ: Would you describe the black community on the east side as close knit, as loose knit?

FERDIE WALKER: Well, it was very a very close knit community. All of us knew each other and everybody kind of took care of each other. There were people in my community who depended on my mom for health care, because they didn't have any money as such to go to the doctor. There was a doctor in our neighborhood who took care of a lot of people, he was a black doctor, took care of a lot of people without any charge. But
then, we had a lot of people in our community who belonged to what we called at that time the Holiness Church and those peoples ideas about health care was kind of like the Christian Scientist. They did not believe in going to the doctor. They didn't believe in taking care of medicine, but they called my mom, Nurse Miller. So when anything happened and they needed, things did not clear up right away, then they would always call Nurse Miller to come over and see about them. And she always went, but she was kind of a, I don't know, what was mother. She was kind of a stickler and if she told you what to do and you didn't do it and you came back with the same thing again you got a lecture. And, she just told you, don't come back over here to me for advice if you're not going to do what I say do. And you get some soap and water and you clean this up and you cover it up and keep that grease off of it, and then come back and I'll see what else you need to do. It was the same way at school. The teachers in our school took care of the children. They brought hair ribbons, and these were all black teachers. We didn't have any white teachers. They brought hair ribbons, hair ribbons and ties to school so that everybody could look like everybody else. And so they had ties for the boys. They had hair ribbons for the girls. They had combs. And this was even after I became a school nurse which was much later.

We combed the little girls hair if they came to school without it being combed. If they came to school unkept and not clean, we took them to the rest room and we washed them. Cleaned them up.
Put on clean clothes. And we always did that. One of the things about school that I remember very well was that we always got what was left over from the white schools. We never, the whole time I was going to school, had a new stove or new pots or new pens or anything in our home economics department. Everything that we got was passed down to us from the white schools. This was junior high school which is where we had our first experience in home ec and senior high school the same way, you know. And we knew it. Books, the same thing. We never had a new book. If you got a book and that whole page wasn't filled out with names, you know, in the front of the book there's a little thing that has about eight or nine lines on it. If you ever got a book where only two lines were filled out, you really thought you were getting something special. Cause that meant that only two folks had had it before you got it. But we did. We took care of each other. As we got older and started into high school, then we always had a car. My mother had to have a car in her work and so we just loaded up the car with all the kids in the neighborhood who wanted to go to the ball games. And if you could stand mother's mouth, then you were okay, because she gave a lecture every time.

PAUL ORTIZ: Were there black owned businesses in Fort Worth?

FERDIE WALKER: Yes. There were many restaurants that were black owned.
PAUL ORTIZ: On the east side?

FERDIE WALKER: Yes, on the east side.

ARCHIE WALKER: This was really a necessity, because you couldn't go to the white restaurants. So that was the only option you had.

FERDIE WALKER: We could go to the white department stores. We had, you know, separate fountains like you've seen in all the movies and stuff. One for colored and one for white and all that. But they did accept our money where we bought stuff. In Fort Worth, I cannot remember that they didn't let us try on things. In Dallas in some of the stores, they didn't let you try on stuff.

PAUL ORTIZ: At Fort Worth?

FERDIE WALKER: In Dallas. But I can't remember that we could not. I remember trying on clothes and things in Fort Worth.

PAUL ORTIZ: Now you mentioned that the Holiness Church. Now this is something that I don't really know much about at all.

ARCHIE WALKER: That's what we called it.
FERDIE WALKER: That is the Church of God in Christ.

ARCHIE WALKER: Something like that. A long name.

FERDIE WALKER: But these are very demonstrative people ... 

ARCHIE WALKER: They still exist today.

FERDIE WALKER: ... who explode and yell and scream and roll on the floor.

ARCHIE WALKER: Talk in tongues they used to call it.

FERDIE WALKER: And there was that church, that kind of church right behind our house, and that was one of our entertainment activities. We'd run down and peak in the windows and see what they were doing.

ARCHIE WALKER: They'd spy on them.

FERDIE WALKER: But they really did. The people shouted and cried. The minister yelled and carried on. Many times they had church outside. And even though there was quite a bit of shouting that went on in our Methodist church too, but it was not the same
kind of uncontrolled shouting and so forth.

PAUL ORTIZ: And they had different kinds of medical practices?

FERDIE WALKER: Uh uh. Uh uh. They did not believe in using medicines. The last resort was to use medicine.

ARCHIE WALKER: And that's still true with that particular religious group.

PAUL ORTIZ: Would they use, perhaps, herbal remedies?

ARCHIE WALKER: I don't know.

FERDIE WALKER: No, they didn't, as far as I know. I cannot remember that they used any herbal remedies. What they used was something we called carbolated vaseline. Carbolated vaseline is like vaseline, Blue Seal Vaseline or petroleum jelly, okay, with some carbolic acid in it and it was something that you could buy across the counter. And it's still very good medicine if you can find it.

PAUL ORTIZ: Mr. Walker, can you tell me what area you grew up in and a little bit of background about your childhood?
ARCHIE WALKER: Well, much of my earlier childhood we lived in the same community. On the east side. So you have all of that. So I lived in the east side, several different places, but all on the east side until I was, I guess 6th or 7th grade which means I was almost a teenager. So, around 11 or 12 years old I moved from the east side to the north side which was a similar community but a different makeup of people, kind of quasi-rural. By quasi-rural I mean many of the people had been farmers and moved into the city to work at the packing houses. You understand what a packing house is? So the north side housed the stockyards.

What was it called? Fort Worth Stockyards. And the pay was outstanding as far as black people were concerned. Everybody made good money. So the community was quite different from the east side. Even though these were "blue collar workers" they had good incomes. So the quality of housing and things in the community was much better than it was on the east side. And I only lived there for a little while. Moved from there to the west side which was similar. Another one of these quasi-rural communities which was, what was it called? Lake Amore. And by then I was ready for high school and from there we moved back to the east side. So for the, I guess first and second years of high school I lived on the east side again and then my senior year my family finally bought a home on the south side. But World War II brought income for my father that had not been possible earlier. Just the volume.
Other people having money because my father was kind of a, I don't know what to call him. An entrepreneur I guess. He sold lumber.

He sold firewood. Then lots of people had ice boxes as opposed to a refrigerators. So he sold ice to the people. Summer he sold ice and winter he sold wood. And then he sold anything that people would buy. He sold it. And my mother, of course, was always a domestic and she always worked. So by the time I was 15, 16 years old, of course, we were, when we moved to the south side.

Of course, by then, I was working. I started working, I think when I was like 12, 13 years old, whenever I wasn't in school. School was paramount to me. It was kind of odd during those days, because most boys my age didn't care very much about school. They had to be made to go to school, but it was special for me. And then, of course, during the war, I made lots of money, personally, as a teenager. Jobs were plentiful. So from, I guess age 15 until I finished high school I always had a full time job even though I was going to school. And for many of those years I was the delivery boy for the local black owned pharmacy. Well, drug store because he sold more than just pharmaceuticals. And I worked that job for 8 hours a day, 7 days a week. And of course he was nice to us. When we weren't busy, I got to do my homework. In fact, he insisted on it. So it was very compatible with my schooling.

FERDIE WALKER: It was very supportive community.
ARCHIE WALKER: Yes, everybody supported anybody who wanted to go to school. That was the tendency throughout all the communities. Then the kids who were good in school and who wanted to go to school got support from everybody. And then, of course, I worked for the war cause as they called it in those days. Canning factories mostly, where they were canning beef to ship to Russia and to Europe. And, of course, the pay was tremendous. So I worked there during the summer and still kept my drugstore job. So I was working two jobs.

FERDIE WALKER: Archie, I think you ought to tell them about your life before you moved to Fort Worth. I think that's the most interesting part of your life.

ARCHIE WALKER: Oh, yes. So much of it is vague to me because I was so young. I was, before six years old, but I remember some of it. I did grow up during the depression and I remember it very well. My father was a tenant farmer when I was first born and in those years like just immediately pre-school and first grade we lived on a farm. And during the depression everybody was on relief. Relief was the same as today's welfare. The government came around, I don't remember how often, but they brought.
FERDIE WALKER: Every month.

ARCHIE WALKER: Was it every month? They brought canned foods, fresh fruits, and fresh vegetables in season. And the fresh fruits were grapefruit and I think that's why I love grapefruit so much now. Only got fresh grapefruit when the relief truck came and you know you don't have any refrigeration so you don't have no way to keep them so you eat them as fast as you can. Brought canned beef, mostly. Pork and beans. And, of course, fresh potatoes, and then all the fresh fruit. Apples, oranges, grapefruits. The other thing that tied with the relief program was the local merchants I suppose had a program they called, well, I don't remember what it was called now, but at Christmas time, you would write a letter to this person.

FERDIE WALKER: The Good Fellow.

ARCHIE WALKER: Good Fellow. That's right.

FERDIE WALKER: Good Fellows was the name of the grocery. It's like in St. Louis they have something called family, one family aid, or something like that. But these Good Fellows were folks who collected good things.

ARCHIE WALKER: And gave them to the poor kids.
PAUL ORTIZ: Were these black business people?

ARCHIE WALKER: No. The whole community.

FERDIE WALKER: All white.

ARCHIE WALKER: In fact, almost all white. I would guess. Wouldn't you guess? It was the big department stores, the banks. Those were the guys who were funding it. And that's where we'd get Christmas gifts, birthday gifts. You'd write in to these people and tell them what you needed. They made you make two lists — what you needed and what you wanted. And what you needed was almost always met. What you want, you was suppose to list them in the order of how much you wanted them. One for each child. The parents weren't included for these. And then at Christmas time, Christmas Eve I think it was or the day before Christmas Eve it got delivered to your front door. And your parents would take it and put it under the Christmas tree and the next day you'd have gifts. All the poor kids who chose to write and some were too proud to do it. But that part of the depression I remember very well, but my dad didn't have a job. So we lived off of what he could draw and what he could sell of what he drew and after he paid the owner of the land. So it was very difficult. In fact, that's why we left the farm.
PAUL ORTIZ: And where was that farm at?

ARCHIE WALKER: Waco, Texas. And so we moved from the farm to the city.

FERDIE WALKER: I want you to tell him about your great-grandmother.

ARCHIE WALKER: Okay, lived with my aunt. My father had a huge family. Nine boys and one girl and they almost all lived right there in Waco at that time. But I had a great-grandmother who lived with the only girl, my aunt. And she was matriarch of that family. So she did all the cooking, all the buying for my aunt's family, and she walked to the market every day to buy fresh food to cook. Every day. And the distance that she would walk would be the equivalent of walking from the hotel to downtown Tuskegee, to the city of Tuskegee and back. And she did that every morning before sun up. And she did that. I think she lived to be 102, 105. A hundred and something. She died after my kids were born. So that was a long time. She lived a long, long time.

All of those things, and I can't remember them all I guess. I remember walking to school. That was funny. We had to cross a creek. My mother and my dad said I was afraid of water, because if the creek was up this much I would come back home. I'd say,
the creek is up. My dad used to spank my butt and make me go across the creek. I went to a one room school in the first grade. First through the twelfth grades all in one room. And the teacher was a Mrs. Jones. I know the name very well. And I got to introduce my wife to Mrs. Jones who was, I don't know how old she was when you met her, but she was very, very old. But she remembers me and she always remembered me. We used to exchange notes every year. I guess through the time I graduated from college. Kids who went to college were almost worshipped in my section of the family. I was the first person in all of my family to get a college degree. And when I say all, I'm meaning my father and all of his brothers, all of their children and all of their children. So that's three generations of children that could have gone to college but did not. And we all grew up in the same circumstances, because my father's, some of my father's brothers were older than his mother. My grandfather, my father's father had two, almost three families.

FERDIE WALKER: No. Just two as far as I know.

ARCHIE WALKER: Two. Two set of families. So that when he married my father's mother he already had grand, grown children. So they had, I had cousins who were my mother's age from my grandfather's earlier families.
FERDIE WALKER: And cousins kind of kept up with each other. Archie's family and my family. We still do.

ARCHIE WALKER: Still do.

FERDIE WALKER: Because there were just two of us and most of my mother's sisters had two children. There were no really big, that's really strange, because that second generation. See mother comes from a family of 12, but nobody of her sisters or brothers had more than two children. Nobody. And we're still very close. Those of us who are alive now.

ARCHIE WALKER: My family was just the opposite. All boys. My father had one sister. All of his brothers and sisters, almost all of them except two, well, Aunt Cur, Uncle Gibbons, I guess were the only two who had more than one girl. And they all had four or more children. And then I had two girls and my son had all boys.

PAUL ORTIZ: Was your great-grandmother born as a slave?

ARCHIE WALKER: Yes. She was an ex-slave. She was. And you asked, I heard you ask my wife where were her stories. There was a hush hush among black people about those kinds of experiences. Bad experiences were seldom repeated to the children and even the
ones that they may have experienced they were never discussed. I was telling my wife once about some very bad experiences I knew my dad had race-wise where white people had really abused him verbally. And he was so ashamed that we had to hear that. We went, daddy, what's the matter with him. Shut up boy. We're not going to discuss that. And that was the end of it. That's, as I remember it that's the way black people were they did not discuss.

FERDIE WALKER: At least in our family.

ARCHIE WALKER: Unpleasant racial experiences. Never.

FERDIE WALKER: And my mother would never discuss anything about, now maybe if she had lived to hear Roots, maybe she would have been pushed to discuss. But my mother would not discuss the fact that she was of mixed parentage. She never admitted that her grandfather was an Irish man from Ireland. Her father's father. She would never talk about that and we'd ask her, now. I don't know and she just would not discuss it. Even though you could look at her and she was a very, very fair person and I knew that there had to be a racial mixture in that family, but she would never admit it. She would never admit it.

ARCHIE WALKER: Never even discuss it. And that was traditional.
FERDIE WALKER: And I'm sorry, you know, now because I don't know anything about her. The only things that I know were from my vagabond uncle who went off to California and stayed for six years and about the seventh year he'd always drop in on us with a big sack of nuts and a big sack and he always had some girlfriend or something standing off somewhere. And he's the only person who would really share anything with me.

ARCHIE WALKER: But we would press and we called her "Mammy". You know, to this day, I don't know her name.

PAUL ORTIZ: Your great-grandmother.

ARCHIE WALKER: Yes. All we knew was Mammy. And before, it was important for us to know, it wasn't important for us to know, by the time it was important everybody who could know was dead. But it was never discussed. If it was discussed, it was discussed in whispers. One of the other things that seldom gets mentioned now, I listen to these tv shows when people are relating, there was a period in which black people did not want to be called Africans. You know that?

FERDIE WALKER: Sure.
ARCHIE WALKER: And I mentioned that ...

FERDIE WALKER: And black was terrible.

ARCHIE WALKER: ...right. Because of Roots. It came out just a little bit in Roots where that started. They always talked about the African as if he was something different than what they were. Okay. And that was in the black community as long as I can remember. Africans were somebody else not me. And that was by design. You know, if you weren't an African maybe they wouldn't treat you like slaves. I know that sounds silly, but that's what went on in people's minds. The racial things for me and my generation or my peers was a little traumatic I imagine than Ferdie's might have been, because there is a difference in the way white people treat black males and how they treat black females. And it has always been that way. We used to wonder what had we done to make these guys so scared of us, because that's the way we were treated as if we were something to be afraid of. And so some very nasty which happened to those of us who were 14, 15, 16 years old.

TAPE ONE - SIDE B
PAUL ORTIZ: Your parents weren't likely to talk about some of those experiences, but both of you saw these kinds of experiences. What were some of those experiences?

ARCHIE WALKER: Well, besides the obvious. I'm sure you know about the legal things that were going on about that time. But the little nasty things like you're walking down the street and there might be four old tobacco chewing white men who won't move so you've got to walk in the streets. That kind of stuff. Or you didn't have to worry about restaurants, because they wouldn't let you in there. But there just like other western and mid-western towns there was a lot of sidewalk selling. And in Fort Worth there were lots of restaurants that had a sidewalk window where people could buy stuff on the go when they're getting on the bus or getting off the bus. I've had it personally happen to me where the white guy comes up and he pushes me aside so he could be waited on next even though I'm there. And you're not expected to resist. Well, it was bad for us, because we were the forerunners of the resistance, you know. You know, late 40s, early 50s is where this whole thing started and it just boiled over. By the time that the late 50s arrived it was boiling. Well, we were at the beginning of it and lots of my peers had some bad physical things happen to them because of this resistance. I mean physically beaten by the police or beaten up by a group of white
men. The biggest things were buses and restaurants. Not so much restaurants. Most of us knew better than to go into a restaurant, but a counter. A food counter. What's wrong with you're giving me a Coke and letting me take off with it. That was the attitude that my peers had. So we did a lot of silly things that we had gotten killed over it, but we didn't, at that time we didn't care.

PAUL ORTIZ: What were some of those things?

ARCHIE WALKER: Well, like walking up to the counter or pretending that you couldn't speak English. If you were black and you couldn't speak English, you got served. That's right. If you were anything but a black American, you got served.

FERDIE WALKER: That happened to me in college. I went to school in Nashville, Tennessee. I was at Fisk and there were a lot of girls at that school were from New Orleans and they were very fair skinned and had straight hair. And, they knew a little bit of French. And we got together and they suggested let's just go to the movie. And I said, go to the movie. And so ( ). Yes, all you have to do is say "possum blunt" and so that's what we did. When we got to the window, we just said "possum blunt". Lay our money down and got a ticket and went in and we laughed and laughed. It was the funniest thing we'd ever heard. But there is one thing I want to tell you about. My dad and my mother were
both very active in the NAACP. They were members from the very beginning. And so when voting rights came along, my daddy was one of the first people to be in the line to vote. And you know we couldn't vote in the south until Mr. Truman fixed it. Better let those folks vote when the voting rights act went through. And I will never forget that, because that was very traumatic to us and it was scary because my dad and two of his cousins who lived just within three blocks of us went to the poll to vote the very first time that black folks could vote right there. And Cousin Will and Cousin Frank, Cousin Will was about six six. Cousin Frank might have been six feet and my daddy was about five four. They all got together and dressed up in their best, well, they weren't, not their best clothes but they put on clean clothes, shirts and all and went to vote. They left home at like about seven o'clock in the morning and we were all just sitting there just waiting for them to get back. And we waited, and waited, and waited all day long. And those folks had them standing up there from the time that they got there at seven until four thirty in the afternoon and would not give them a ballot. And finally, the police came and made them pollsters give them a ballot so that they could vote. But we were at home and we were scared to death because we didn't know what had happened to them.

PAUL ORTIZ: About what year was that?
FERDIE WALKER: Oh Archie, when was that in. It was in the 40s.

ARCHIE WALKER: Yeah, it was after World War II ends.

PAUL ORTIZ: Now you mentioned the NAACP chapter and your father had been involved in helping to organize that?

FERDIE WALKER: No, he didn't help to organize it. He has always been a good member. Yeah. He's always been a dues paying member. He always went to meetings just as he did with the YMCA. But he did, he was a supporter. He was a strong supporter.

ARCHIE WALKER: You need to know the chronology of this voting business, because Texas tried to keep everything legal. So when it was decided that they could not keep black people from voting they instituted a poll tax which means that everybody - white and black - had to pay a $2 tax to get a poll id so they could vote and you couldn't vote without that id. And there were shocked when so many black people bought, paid the poll tax.

PAUL ORTIZ: Was that a retroactive poll tax? Would that accumulate from the time that ...

ARCHIE WALKER: No, you paid it every year. It wasn't
something that you paid just once. You paid it every year. And that was ruled illegal and that's the period that she's talking about is when the police had to enforce it when the poll tax was ruled illegal. Now at this time we were almost grown. So this would have been in the 50s or close to the 50s.

FERDIE WALKER: '48, '49, or something like that.

PAUL ORTIZ: Has there been a change in black political activities, say from the 30s to the 40s.

ARCHIE WALKER: The thirties to the forties I can't speak to, but I know in the mid-forties to the mid-fifties things really began to change and I credit Adam Clayton Powell for most of it. Are you familiar with Adam Clayton Powell?

FERDIE WALKER: Well, I don't credit him for most of it, but he was one of the people who was certainly a pusher and a shover as far as civil rights and voting activities.

ARCHIE WALKER: Well, I meant in getting the people to recognize that it was possible.

FERDIE WALKER: And I remember that Dad was really involved in pushing things that the NAACP was involved it and we went
through that period in which many black folks felt like Walter White had no business being president of the NAACP, because he was white, you know. Not only was his name White, but he looked white. So a lot of black folks didn't want to follow what Walter White said to do. But my dad said that you just have to look at who gets the job done. But he's always been a supporter, not an organizer, but a supporter.

ARCHIE WALKER: Well, and that voting business was very serious. Still is, believe it or not. I know that when Ferdie and I were adults we were asked by her father to work the polls as poll judges.

PAUL ORTIZ: In Forth Worth?

ARCHIE WALKER: Uh huh. And we did. And I was absolutely flabbergasted at the number of white people who would not vote if they had to take their ballot from me.

PAUL ORTIZ: In the 50s?

ARCHIE WALKER: Yeah. That was early 50s. I'm not sure, yeah, it had to be the early fifties because that's when we met. This would have been 1950, for sure, '49 or '50.
FERDIE WALKER: Cause we got married in '51.

ARCHIE WALKER: Right. And we were not married when this happened. And, it was unbelievable at the number of people who came into that fire station to vote and saw me sitting there handing out the ballots and would turn around and go back.

FERDIE WALKER: Well, see that doesn't really surprise me, because as a registered nurse I worked at Harris Memorial Methodist Hospital in Fort Worth. And they were so very short of nurses then that they had to let us work everywhere. Now the first time I went to work in a white hospital in Fort Worth they made us work down in the basement. Black registered nurses had to work down in the basement with the colored patients only. But then after the shortage came then we had to work every where because there weren't enough white nurses to send all over the place to work. And I have had patients to refuse to take medicine because I was giving it to them. Now at first it was so new to have black nurses taking care of white patients that the supervisor of nurses, white supervisors all at that time didn't know how to handle it. But when things really got tight and there was nobody else to give the medicine this one nurse told the man, she said, and we never got called Mrs. or Miss or anything. We were Nurse Miller is what I was before we married and Nurse Walker. She's the only who is here and if you don't take it from
her you won't get it. Well, that's the first time I had ever heard a white person tell a white person that this person is here and is capable of taking care of you and we're not going to do anything about it. So that was really a different thing in my life.

PAUL ORTIZ: And you were working at which hospital?

FERDIE WALKER: Harris Memorial Hospital.

PAUL ORTIZ: In Fort Worth?

FERDIE WALKER: In Fort Worth, Texas. Archie was in the army and he was in Korea.

ARCHIE WALKER: The Korean War turned a lot of things around. Many of us who were drafted into the army to go to Korea were hang-overs from World War II.

PAUL ORTIZ: Hang-overs?

ARCHIE WALKER: Meaning that I could have been in World War II. So when the Korean War came along we were the first ones called. So the original waves of draftees that went to Korea were people who, they started out age 26 or older is who got called
first. So the first wave were older men and there was some hostilities left over from what happened to the soldiers from World War II who came back and got no recognition. So we were pretty mad. Most of us. We were mad at having to go in the first place.

PAUL ORTIZ: To Korea?

ARCHIE WALKER: Yes. So during that era attitudes throughout the country both military and civilian really changed and the change hasn't stopped. That's about where I think it started.

PAUL ORTIZ: And you think the war, the experience of the war had ...

ARCHIE WALKER: No, the resentment.

PAUL ORTIZ: The resentment. The resentment of the war itself. The resentment of the people who served, of having to serve. They didn't want to be there. And it just boiled over. Because the segregation was still paramount. They still had segregated military in the first part of the Korean War. And I guess Mr. Truman got the message if he didn't do something soon, he was going to have a war in the army. Because they were already having trouble.
PAUL ORTIZ: Did you see that kind of thing?

ARCHIE WALKER: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. There were situations in Korea, on the grounds in Korea, where the black soldiers and the white soldiers were almost ready to go to war against each other. They really had some trouble with the front lines with that, with the 24th infantry division which for one time was all black.

PAUL ORTIZ: Was that the outfit you were with?

ARCHIE WALKER: No. No. No. This was an attitude throughout the military during that period. It just filtered through so that everybody was testy. We had fights in the NCO club for no reason. Here these guys been buddies for years and all of a sudden they're punching each other out, because one said something to the other that he wasn't suppose to say. I've known the guys who were good friends and the white guy would call this other guy nigger and nothing ever happens. But then that all switched, where when he was called that he punched him. Where before, he ignored it. I don't know what was going on, but it surely, I was there. I saw it. It just switched.

PAUL ORTIZ: Do you have personal experiences that enraged you regarding ...
ARCHIE WALKER: No. I really didn't have racial experiences in the army. You know, that kind. I saw a few, but I don't know that I had any personally.

PAUL ORTIZ: You said that you saw a few of them.

ARCHIE WALKER: Yes. Like the one I just mentioned. The army was strange. The army has a tendency to recognize talent. So when they got somebody who looks like they can make things happen they get treated pretty nice and I think that's what happened to me. I was pushy. I was aggressive. I was already out of college. Been working for two or three years. So I wasn't the young ill-educated 12th grader that they were accustomed to dealing with. So I got a lot more respect than is customarily. In fact, I got a commission.

FERDIE WALKER: One day.

ARCHIE WALKER: Yeah, one day and they took it back the next day. It was a whole transition of things going on in Korea and in the Army. Well, while I was there was the time that Truman signed the desegregation law for the military. Immediately. He didn't mean next month, next year. Now. And explained what now meant. Today.
PAUL ORTIZ: And you would characterize this as being caused by some of the tensions that you saw.

FERDIE WALKER: Yes. Well, I think he was just trying to stop a mutiny. Well, and it was the thing to do. It needed to have been done years ago.

ARCHIE WALKER: Now about this commission. I don't want you to forget that. See that directly affected me. When Archie went in the army, Archie was just a PFC and then he got promoted to corporal and then they took that back the next day because he hadn't been in the army for 12 months. So one day he was a corporal and then two days later he was a PFC again and I was still getting $20 allowance. And then he got a field promotion to lieutenant. Is that what it was?

ARCHIE WALKER: Yeah, second lieutenant.

FERDIE WALKER: And then Truman rescinded the war.

PAUL ORTIZ: Truman himself?

ARCHIE WALKER: Yes. Well, what that means is that all commissions that are granted while you are on active duty are
reserve commissions. Army reserve. And so, with concurrent call to active duty. Okay. So I got my commission. In the meantime, Mr. Truman froze all recalls to active duty. So I was still a second lieutenant, but I was a second lieutenant in the army reserves not on active duty. That's what she's talking about. And never did get called.

FERDIE WALKER: I was still trying to make it on that $20 a month. Well, we have done a lot of things and it hasn't all been bad. I can remember the time when I worked three jobs because that's what I needed to do to make it happen. And Archie was making $20 a month. So that's the way life was.

ARCHIE WALKER: But the racial thing as you are interested in I suppose has not gone away. It is still with us. And it's a little more subtle now. What they aren't able to do anymore that they used to be able to do very successfully is set up quasi-false barriers certain kinds of qualifications that they know can't be met. Well, what they have done over the last couple of generations is create what my colleagues call laughingly superniggers. Guys with two PHD's. Guys who know a little bit about everything. Guys who found a way to get a job in these high powered places. Get on boards. And the first thing you know, they're saturated. How you going to turn them down. So the false barriers just went out the window. So you wonder how with the
population as small as it is in relation to the total when you look at all of the black people in high places. I wonder if those people ever wonder how in the world could that happen with such a small minority. When they're telling you every day that 85% of all black people drop out of high school before the 12th grade and yet you got the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Black. How many senators you got, elected and re-elected, black. College presidents. Look at your generals in the army.

FERDIE WALKER: Let's hear him philosophize.

ARCHIE WALKER: No, I'm talking about how there are those barriers aren't accessible any more. So what you're having now is a return to out right blatant racial turn back. Lots of it. Now they're afraid of the law suits. Well, they almost to get rid of that if this new law passes where you, I don't remember what the details are, where it's up to me to prove that you discriminated rather than for you to prove that you didn't. Now I don't know if that law ever passed or not, but I know it was before the house.

PAUL ORTIZ: That's very interesting. Now both of you went to historically black colleges. And, in fact, we haven't talked about those experiences yet.

ARCHIE WALKER: I feel very strongly about mine since I've
just gone over it yesterday with some of the people who are here.

Black college experience for me and for many of my schoolmates was awesome. You were completely in awe. You come out of a community where you've never been more than 50 miles away from home and you come into an environment where you run into a bunch of people who want to tell you every move to make. When to go to the bathroom, what to wear, what to eat, when to sleep, where you can go, where you can't go. There was almost instant hostility between the student and the administration. They told us where to smoke or if we could smoke. Told us when to go to class. When to go to bed, when to go to the library. They taught us how to eat. How to dress. Now I'm just thankful that that wore off pretty fast, because the resentment was just terrific. I'm talking about me.

PAUL ORTIZ: You began at Tuskegee in the 40s?

ARCHIE WALKER: Yes. '45. But beyond that I told the people yesterday that Tuskegee was the greatest thing that had ever happened to me in my entire life.

PAUL ORTIZ: Now how did you come to Tuskegee. What was the process of finding out about it from over in Fort Worth?

ARCHIE WALKER: I'm not sure. I was asked that same question
yesterday and I'm not sure. I know that as high school seniors we went sent scouring to get three colleges to whom we could write for scholarships, fellowships, jobs, work scholarships. Whatever we could get. And I don't know why I choose Tuskegee, but I did. Well, I do know why I choose Tuskegee. I choose Tuskegee because Tuskegee was the only place I could go and learn to fly. They were the only black college that offered flying lessons and that was because of the army flying school here. And there was Hampton which is in Virginia. Oh, Cornell University. I almost knew from the beginning I wasn't going to get into Cornell, but I applied anyway.

PAUL ORTIZ: I'm sorry. What high school were you at in Fort Worth?

ARCHIE WALKER: I. M. Terrell. We both. And I got a response from Tuskegee. They offered me a work scholarship. I even remember the amount. $15 a month, work scholarship, and a $15 a month academic scholarship which came to a total of thirty bucks. It cost me $37.50 a month to go to school. So I had to come up with $7.50. So as soon as I got here I got me another work job. So I had three jobs. The resistance here for me and I guess for my schoolmates was the same as it is for most youngsters during that period. You just rebel against authority. But one thing we never did, we never lost sight of why we were here. We
did nothing that would jeopardize our being here. If we did, we were scared to death that we were going to get sent home which was a no-no. You talking about kids who might have to watch to see if they might commit suicide. Let some kid get the idea that he might get home. Better watch him, because he's scared. I know it scared me. And many of us had that experience. I know I did.

PAUL ORTIZ: Of being sent home?

ARCHIE WALKER: Yes sir. My folks would have killed me. I love to play poker even today. I was doing that when I was in high school and I had bought me a fancy poker set before I came to college. Brand new. Never been used. I opened it after I got here. It was a container that held chips and in the center it held two decks of cards and it had a green mat that folded underneath that you put on the table. Anyway, we did not know that they inspected, well, we knew that they inspected the rooms every day. You had to leave your beds made and the rooms cleaned and they inspected them. If you got a demerit, then the next day you had to be there when they came. Anyway, I didn't lock my trunk. I didn't see that it was any of their business. I didn't think anybody'd be going in my trunk. These guys pulled out every drawer in my trunk and in one of those drawers was this poker set. Took it back to his office and the next day I got this little note in my mail box to see the Dean of Men. So I went to see.
He gave me a receipt where he had sent my poker set home and he said, now you can write and ask your mother if she will send it back to you.

FERDIE WALKER: And see, I can't figure people having that kind of time. To go around and do that.

ARCHIE WALKER: Well, Ferdie, that's all they had to do. We called it harassment.

PAUL ORTIZ: That was under the Dean of Men.

ARCHIE WALKER: And these were guys, and that's when I started learning the meaning of snob. We were becoming so snobbish, because these weren't educated people. These were some of those guys that went to normal school, you know. Normal school was high school in those days, and didn't finish normal school. They were working out of the Dean of Men's office and they had lots of power. Send you home. They could send you home. Yeah. And we were bitter. We were really bitter. But, had they not had those people here lots of those young guys would have never made it past the first semester. Too wild. It's too bad you don't know that when you're young. But it wasn't the racial thing after you got on campus, because you never got a chance to leave, at least for the first six to eight months. And we didn't even go
across the street for the first six or eight months. They had us
tied up from six o'clock in the morning until nine o'clock at
night every day, seven days a week.

PAUL ORTIZ: What was a typical day like?

ARCHIE WALKER: Well, as a freshman, had a tough time,
because Tuskegee theoretically was a quasi-military school. We
wore uniforms and the whole ball of wax.

FERDIE WALKER: What kind of uniforms, honey?

ARCHIE WALKER: Navy blue uniform. Just like my army uniform
today with the hat and whole ball of wax.

FERDIE WALKER: But you weren't in ROTC?

ARCHIE WALKER: No. Well, yes ROTC was required of everybody
for the first two years. Oh yeah. It was required. I didn't get
your question. It was the guys who took ROTC after that who got
paid. Those were the guys who were working for the army. Before
then you weren't working for the army. You were working for the
school. Anyway, typical day. Go to breakfast. Come back to your
room. Clean you room. Get to class. Every class started at
eight o'clock. If you were smart, you got up early enough to
clean your room before you went to breakfast so you wouldn't have to make that two mile walk back. Well, the problem was the school was over crowded so they had at least one more person in each room than they had room for. So getting that many people to coordinate cleaning the room was very, very difficult. Every dormitory had a day room. The day rooms were converted into sleeping rooms and in those day rooms they put six people. No, that would be twelve. No, three double deck beds is what they put in those rooms. Three double deck beds. There were no closets in any of these rooms. So almost everybody had a wardrobe trunk which you used as a closet. So when you put in three double decker beds, six wardrobe trunks, six desks, and six chairs in a room not much bigger than this it was pretty hard to keep it clean. Well, I say clean, I meant neatly arranged. Pretty difficult, but that's what we had to do. And if you wanted to see what that looks, they're still here. Those end rooms down there. The center room over the side porch was the day room and that's where I slept for two years I'm sure. And then after that the attendance began to drop and they stopped crowding us together. But from 1945 or '46 it was terrible. We had almost 4,000 students here. It's only built to take care of 2,500.

PAUL ORTIZ: Were there people who came back, perhaps, from the war on the GI Bill.
ARCHIE WALKER: Yes. That was part of the reason for the over crowding is that 1945, '46. Well, mainly 1946 was the big sweep return of the people on the GI Bill. Well, this is instant cash for the school. Us, we're going free, cause they're paying us. All the GIs were paying cash bucks. So they weren't turning any of them away. They even built temporary quarters back over here and those guys were making big bucks. Lots of them were drawing, you know, they go to school they get paid. And they not only got their tuition paid they also had cash money to spend in the community.

FERDIE WALKER: The GI Bill.

ARCHIE WALKER: The GI Bill was a boom to Tuskegee. It was bad for the week, because it got so crowded that they weren't able to watch them as closely as they used to. So a lot of guys got away with murder and got in trouble. But the over crowding was terrible. I would say for the '45-'46 school year, last half and from '47 on. I'd say for the next three years it was absolutely terrible, because for some reason the attendance of women increased also. Because they were going to try to take one of the women's dormitories and convert it to men's dormitories. The Dean of Women went berserk because she didn't have enough room for the girls as it was. So that was kind of a bad period for the end of World War II. It worked out though. They took, what they did,
are you familiar with the old army air base out here. It's something else now. Okay. Well, they had barracks out there too.

The pilots slept here in Sage Hall and out there is where the enlisted men and the non-pilots stayed, out there at the base. So they had barracks out there. When the army left which was in, it must have been November or December of '45, they gave them to Tuskegee. So the students were being assigned to live out there at the air base. And they had a shuttle going from the campus to out there to bring them back and forth. The only thing about it they only sent the bus three times a day. Bus came in in the morning before class. It went back at lunch. It came back after lunch and it went back after class at night, after supper. And if you missed that bus, you'd have no way to go. Why, you'd have to hire a taxi if you got money, but I imagine the taxi from here to out there must have been pretty expensive. That was it. And that's how they compensated for the over crowding. Then the community assisted by renting rooms. Everybody in the community I'm sure had at least one student that they rented a bedroom to. Many of the women in the neighborhood also sold meals. They converted their dining rooms and living rooms into restaurants and they sold meals. Three times a day. Breakfast, dinner, and supper.

FERDIE WALKER: Would you go on contract with those people?
ARCHIE WALKER: Uh uh. Pay so much a week and you get three meals, every day. So it was kind of a cooperative venture to compensate for the over crowding.

PAUL ORTIZ: And so, Mrs. Walker, you went to Fisk. What was the process then as to how you go from Fort Worth to Fisk.

ARCHIE WALKER: I had an older sister who went to Fisk also. Now Fisk, in our community, in the black community of Fort Worth was the school for girls to go to. It was considered like a finishing school where you went to improve on your social graces, learn how to walk, and to learn how to be a social being. And, so my sister went to Fisk. She went to Fisk on scholarship because she was a very smart person and I went to Fisk because she did. And how can you do less for one than you do for the other. And there were a lot of teachers and other people in our community who were looked up to who had gone to Fisk before it was really kind of the place to go. Fisk and Howard. We only had one teacher who had gone to Howard, but we had many who had gone to Fisk.

ARCHIE WALKER: She didn't tell you what the boys say for the reason they sent their girls to Fisk. (laugher) Fisk was where all the rich, black people through the country sent their sons to go to school. One of the only black medical schools was right across the street. So they'd go there to get them a husband too.
FERDIE WALKER: They'd go over to Meharry to get them.

PAUL ORTIZ: You know I was going to ask why not Tuskegee.

FERDIE WALKER: No. Tuskegee was not of a finishing kind of thing. Fisk was big in the arts.

ARCHIE WALKER: Culture.

FERDIE WALKER: Culture. And that kind of things.

ARCHIE WALKER: That was the thing that kept a lot of our generation from coming to Tuskegee. It's a blue collar school. Tuskegee still has today, I believe, two year courses. That was big right after the war. We can send kids out of here. They can become licensed electricians, licensed plumbers, carpenters, brick masons. If you knew what those guys make money now, those are big bucks. But where you get the training? Tuskegee was the only place in the country the black boys could learn those trades, cause they couldn't do the apprenticeship because the unions wouldn't let them. Still don't let them in very quickly. But they could come here and still do it today. But that was the big drawing card. So Tuskegee was really a blue collar theoretically if you want to label it. It's where most of your blue collar
successes came from.

FERDIE WALKER: You could go to Tuskegee and get out of school and get a job.

ARCHIE WALKER: Everybody got a job out of Tuskegee. Didn't have anybody that graduated from college and going out and doing something else. They almost always had a job at what they were trained to do.

FERDIE WALKER: And I guess that was part of the legacy that Booker T. Washington left, you know, because that's what he was big about was people learning to work.

ARCHIE WALKER: Dignity and all work.

FERDIE WALKER: Yeah, that's right. And going ahead and making a living. Not just sitting down and thinking about it. But that's how I got to Fisk.

ARCHIE WALKER: She and I grew up in a time when the recognition of the importance of culture, fine tuning one's cultural skills was super important. All of us were busy trying to make sure we knew how to wear the proper clothes, how to sit at the dining room and not embarrass ourselves, and those were
important things to our generation. And so lots of people used that as a basis for selecting a college.

PAUL ORTIZ: So that helps explain, Mrs. Walker, why you went to Fisk while you went to Tuskegee.

FERDIE WALKER: Yeah, and then it's like what kinds of goals the parents set for their children. So if you wanted your child to grow up and be like Mrs. Trespant, and Mrs. Trespant went to Fisk. Then you tried your best. Even though that was very expensive as such and I can't remember what the dollars involved were when I went to Fisk. It was really one of the more expensive black colleges to go to. I suppose Talladega may have been equally as expensive and it was also a cultural, black cultural. Talladega's in Alabama. Yeah, Alabama.

ARCHIE WALKER: Yeah, just a few miles from here.

FERDIE WALKER: And it was a cultural center.

ARCHIE WALKER: Because we used to say Talladega had the prettiest girls.

PAUL ORTIZ: Prettier than girls at Fisk?
FERDIE WALKER: ... cook and clean. Would teach you how to carry a bedpan and scrub floors and wait on folks. So I think she really was hoping all the time that I would change my mind and not want to go. She really did not feel that nursing was much of anything to do, but I did.

PAUL ORTIZ: What lead you to that decision? Wanting to be a nurse?

FERDIE WALKER: When my mama was a nurse. And I had been going with her and if she did public health nursing and other school nursing all of my life. When there was nobody at home for me to go home from school and have somebody there. There was usually somebody there until my aunt died. And when there was nobody there then I was in the back of the car with mother and I made home visits with her. I was with her when she nailed quarantine signs on people's houses because there was a contagious disease in the community. And it was just something that I wanted
to do. And she did not deter me, but she really did try hard. So Fisk and Meharry had a five year program where you could go and do your basic sciences and so forth for the first two years at Fisk and then you'd go to Meharry for three years to complete all of your other sciences. So I went to school, and you graduate with a BS degree in nursing. So that fit into my desire to go to Fisk and continue on at Meharry. It was never just to go to Fisk and plan to be there for four years and get a degree in something. Fisk was my way to get to nursing and a degree. And that's what it was for me. And I was really too young to go, I know I was, 15 when I went to Fisk and my mother and I really did have some hard times with that because she told me that she wasn't going to let me go. And I told her if she didn't let me go to Fisk that year I wasn't ever going anywhere. And she really did believe me. She really thought I meant it and I really did mean it because that was all I wanted to be. I just wanted to be a nurse. That was all. So when she realized it, if I went at 15 I would be at least 20 when I got out. Then I got to go to Fisk. But I really did. I grew up wanting to be a nurse. I had taken care of an aunt who lived with us and she and I were just really very close, who was sick. She had diabetes and I just did a lot of things for her through a lot of bad spells that she had. She had to take insulin and I could help her with that. Then one time she had a real bad problem with sores and things. And so, I just really felt like that was what I wanted to do. I wanted to be a nurse. This was
my way to get there and still remain friends with my mother. So it was just okay. And my dad was just the greatest kind of guy. Never raised up and raised his voice at anybody or anything unless you crossed him. He was very agreeable. He just sat me down. He said, now Ferdie, are you sure that's what you want to do. And I convinced him that I did. So he said, well, Abby, we better let her go ahead and do it. And so that's really how I got there.

PAUL ORTIZ: So you started at Fisk around 1943.

FERDIE WALKER: 1944. 1944.

PAUL ORTIZ: What was the social life like at Fisk?

FERDIE WALKER: Oh, it was wonderful. See I really didn't have a whole bunch of free social life at home, you know, with a date occasionally and I didn't date very early. And the date was to leave home and be back at the time set when I was at home. Well, when I got to Fisk, boy, we could just swarm around there.

ARCHIE WALKER: You think about that word swarm.

FERDIE WALKER: Yeah, we did. We swarmed. There were all these boys from all over the world and I had never seen and never seen and stay out until 10:30. Every night you could stay out
until 10:30 and you could go to the canteen. You could smoke. I hadn't been at Fisk for two weeks before I learned to smoke, because that's what I learned to do the first day I got there. Get those nasty cigarettes and start smoking, because that was the grown-up thing to do. But it was really freedom for me. There was nobody looking over my shoulder to see what I was doing. We could go to the canteen with the bands. It was just really wonderful. It was a coming out party and I just came right on out. Met a lot of really neat people from all over the United States. Learned how to tell really big lies about the oil wells in my back yard.

ARCHIE WALKER: The joke behind that is when we were growing up and you'd go to other parts of the world, soon as you say you're from Texas everybody thought you owned oil wells.

FERDIE WALKER: And I just feed into it. But I did really meet some nice people. Really nice people. Nice friends that I still have and still enjoy very much. And the dating thing was great and knowing people from different sections of the United States and being friendly with them. And then going to Meharry. My class at Meharry was the first class after the Cadet Nurse Corp. Are you familiar with the Cadet Nurse Corp. The army established in many schools of nursing what they called a Cadet Nurse Corp and they paid these girls, the nursing students, to go
to school. It was like being a part of the army specialized training corp only it was the nurses. And ours was the first class after that which meant that we had to pay our own way for everything and we felt like we were overcharged at Meharry. So then we just kind of took advantage of that. There were only 13 of us anyway and every time we sat down, we had a class meeting and we decided when they let the aides and the maids wear our uniforms that we'd go on strike. So we were too imbecile to really strike. So we just took off our uniforms and wore print dresses and caps to work and that was our strike.

ARCHIE WALKER: That was your protest.

FERDIE WALKER: That was our protest and we choose to do it just before the joint commission audited hospital accreditation was coming. ( ) So this was kind of the activist thing that we chose to do because the school was doing nothing to keep everybody from taking our things. And we had to pay where the other girls were being paid to be there. We had to pay full freight. And so, we said, we'll get you. But being away and in college at Fisk and at Meharry was kind of a coming out for me because I'd never had that much independence in my whole life. I had never been able to make those kinds of big decisions for myself. I had always been kind of told what to do by my mom and my family and all. But then when I was away from them then I was able to make some decisions
on my own. It was really wonderful for me.

PAUL ORTIZ: Now how did you met Mr. Walker?

FERDIE WALKER: It was tough. We had both graduated from college and I was a single woman at home being chased by any number of guys and having to jump over the couch to get away from some of them. And when he said, well, why don't we go out. I said, listen. I'm not jumping over any more couches. I'm tired of jumping over couches. Now if you want to sit down and talk, okay, but don't be trying to get me in the bed. I guess he said this is a crazy girl.

ARCHIE WALKER: You didn't tell him what I said. She won't tell you that, see. I said I'll make a deal with you. You don't try to marry me and I won't try to get you in bed. And she agreed and we had a ball. I was so tired of feeling like being backed in a corner. Some gal trying to get me to the altar for some five years. I was up to here. Why can't we just go out and have a drink and dance and I'll take you home and I go home. Couldn't find anybody like that.

FERDIE WALKER: But we did not know each other. We didn't date at all when we were growing up, even though we only lived, at one time we only lived about four or five blocks apart.
ARCHIE WALKER: Went to the same high school.

FERDIE WALKER: Uh uh, and went to the same junior high school. But may have known your name, but we just didn't travel around.

ARCHIE WALKER: Well, I knew your name. Just didn't travel in the same circles.

PAUL ORTIZ: Well, Mr. and Mrs. Walker, I know I've taken up entirely too much of your time.

FERDIE WALKER: I tell you that this one thing that really sticks in my mind and I talked to Archie about it plenty of other times. One really harassing kind of thing that I went through and at that time I was 11 years old and I will never forget it. I used to go back and forth to church on Sunday afternoons to the United Methodist youth group and I always rode the bus. And you had to stand on the corner which was about two blocks from my house to catch the bus and the policemen, in those days all police people were white and all bus drivers were white.

ARCHIE WALKER: All city employees were white.
FERDIE WALKER: Yeah, all city employees. And these policemen would harass me as I was standing on this corner waiting for the bus to come. And sometimes the two of them would drive up, you know, the bus stop was up high and the street was down low. And they'd drive up under there and then they'd expose themselves.

PAUL ORTIZ: Who? The policemen?

FERDIE WALKER: Yes. While I was standing there and it just really scared me to death. And the only reason I did not go home at that time was because if I had gone home my mother would have made me stay. So I just stepped back from the corner and because I rode that way all the time the bus driver didn't see me standing there at the corner. He'd always stop and I'd get on the bus. But it was these same cops. So I had a morbid fear of policemen all of my life and it has not completely gone away.

ARCHIE WALKER: Of course, that's pretty common.

FERDIE WALKER: But, and this was in the broad open daylight with the sun shining. But I will never forget it and it always comes back to me every time I get into a really tight experience. That was really bad and it was bad for all black girls, you know.
ARCHIE WALKER: That's one of the things that parents passed on to their children. Fear and hate of the police. If you look at the black kids today, even the little ones, they are scared to death of policemen. And it's beginning to let up a little bit. The police are trying to erase that, but it's generations, and generations, and generations of fear.

ARCHIE WALKER: You know that thing that you need to be aware of, helping people in your community, but it was really hard for me to tell my children that these were helping people. It was really hard. And I really prayed a lot over that. And I said, well, this is something that you got to do. I had a job as public health nurse at Topeka, Kansas and we had a lot of child abuse even then and that was in the '50s. Fifties, and my supervisor said to me she gave me a situation. She said, now when you go to a house and somebody is, a man is beating his wife. Now what are you going to do. I said, call the minister. And she said, Ferdie, you're an intelligent person. You know that's not right. I told her. She's a wonderful person. I said, Alice Jenson, I know that's not the right answer. I should call the police, but I don't believe in the police. And that was after my third child was born. So it has taken a long time for me to have any kind of trust in the policemen as a group even when I tried to say to myself, it's one person and everybody is not like everybody else. But it's really very difficult for me. And that has stayed with
me. What, honey?

ARCHIE WALKER: I was just asking what kind of paper work you got here.

PAUL ORTIZ: This is, these here are interview agreements and as I told you a copy of this material will be deposited here in the archives. This basically gives us permission to deposit it and for students and scholars to listen to the tape in order to use the material. And you need to sign here and I sign over here. And this paper work, perhaps you could just leave this paper work, maybe at the desk on your way out. This is just general clarifying graphical information.

FERDIE WALKER: We will ever know or get to read or see any of this information?

PAUL ORTIZ: If you could print it on the top line and then just sign it here. Yeah, I'm sure that the next time you come back to Tuskegee it will be in the archives.

FERDIE WALKER: How will we know it, by what name?

PAUL ORTIZ: Well, there will be a file. Now we have manila folders and it will be in one location and it will have your name
on the outside of it. And at that point we should be indexed.

FERDIE WALKER: It would be nice to be able to give it to my children. I probably have told you more than I have told them about some things.

PAUL ORTIZ: I'll give you the name of the archivist and so maybe the next time you come over you can maybe give him an advance call and he can arrange something to where you could.

END OF INTERVIEW