

Interview of Ms. Ethel Tompkins. Interviewed by Dr. Suzanne Bonefas of the Crossroads to Freedom Project, Rhodes College.

Ms. Ethel Tompkins was a high school student when the Hoxie School Board decided to integrate in 1955. She was among the first to graduate from the newly integrated Hoxie school. She also was a member of the U.S. Navy.

This interview was conducted in 2006 to be included in the Rhodes College Crossroads to Freedom Digital Archive Project.

The transcripts represent what was said in the interview to the best of our ability. It is possible that some words, particularly names, have been misspelled. We have made no attempt to correct mistakes in grammar.

Suzanne Bonefas: Well thank you so much for agreeing to talk to us. Could you start out by telling us your name?

Ethel Tompkins: My name is Ethel Tompkins.

Suzanne Bonefas: And what is your occupation?

Ethel Tompkins: Right now I'm the Reference Librarian at the Lawrence County Library in Walnut Ridge.

Suzanne Bonefas: Okay and Walnut Ridge which is, is it the same town as Hoxie or are they sort of just –

Ethel Tompkins: No, they're, they're two different towns although you can't tell one from the other. Hoxie is about 15 to 1,600 people and Walnut Ridge is probably a little over 2,000 there now.

Suzanne Bonefas: Okay. Can you tell a little bit about your parents and what they did?

Ethel Tompkins: My parents, Mabel and Jesse Tompkins, up until the time I was ten years old, my dad was a sharecropper just outside of Tuckerman, Arkansas, and my mom did, she chopped cotton, picked cotton and whatever else to keep us in food.

When I was ten years old, we moved to Hoxie and from there dad worked for the railroad and mom took jobs cleaning house.

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Suzanne Bonefas: How far is Hoxie from Tuckerman, is that –

Ethel Tompkins: It's about 29, 30 miles. It's north of Tuckerman.

Suzanne Bonefas: Okay. Did you have any brothers and sisters?

Ethel Tompkins: I have one sister. Her name is Viola. She now lives in Wichita, KS.

Suzanne Bonefas: Okay. I'll ask you a little bit about your childhood now. Can you just tell me some memories of your childhood that influenced you later in life?

Ethel Tompkins: Probably the one driving force for me to get an education was one of the jobs my mother had. She worked for this little motel chain and her job was to clean the little cabins. My job on Saturday was to go and help her. They, it was back in the days where they had the old paste wax, you know, where you put the paste on the floor and then you had buff it?

Suzanne Bonefas: Mm hmm.

Ethel Tompkins: Well they didn't have electrical buffers. What they had was my knees.

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Suzanne Bonefas: Oh.

Ethel Tompkins: Mom would put the paste down and then she would put a blanket down and I'd scoot around the floor on my knees, that was my Saturday job.

So that was, I decided that I was not going to clean houses, anything like that, and the only way to get out of that was to have an education. So that was, that kept me going to, kept me in school to make good grades to get in, I get an education so I could get a job where I wouldn't have to do no, scoot around on the floor and wax floors.

Suzanne Bonefas: Well that, that sounds like a good decision. *(Laughter)*

Ethel Tompkins: Yes, so that was the one thing that defined me as far as getting education, however the, as far as my actual childhood, before we moved to Hoxie it was out in what would be, I guess would be considered the Boonies, because our nearest neighbor was about nine miles away and there was just my sister and I and with her being older, she didn't want to me, you know, a little kid tagging around, so I spent a lot of time by myself, entertaining myself.

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So that made me, I think shaped me to be independent and able to get along on my own because I spent so much time as a small child alone playing and making my own toys and entertaining my own self.

So, and then we moved to Hoxie in a neighborhood where there were kids, it was like, oh boy, this is going to be kind of fun, I got kids to play with. No longer have to be myself. So, but, you know, still, my, I guess my adulthood had been shaped already because I can, you know, take people or leave them. You know, I can, you know, exist and I don't get lonely being by myself because I have a lot of fun with me. Because I learned how when I was a child.

Suzanne Bonefas: Excellent. So you, you were very motivated to get an education. I take it you probably did well in school and (*crossstalk*) –

Ethel Tompkins: Yes. With the, when we moved up here, I attended what was referred to as a one room schoolhouse. We had one, one teachers and the grades from first grade all the way up through the eighth grade.

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And from the eighth grade then you transferred to a high school and back during that time the only high school that you could transfer to was either Jonesboro or Newport so you had to be bused to one of those two towns to go to a local or a black high school, and then after the integration then you went, we transferred to the Hoxie school.

Suzanne Bonefas: And was the one room schoolhouse also in Hoxie.

Ethel Tompkins: Yes.

Suzanne Bonefas: That was with grades one through eight?

Ethel Tompkins: One through eight.

Suzanne Bonefas: And that was one teacher teaching all the kids?

Ethel Tompkins: Mm hmm.

Suzanne Bonefas: How many kids were there about?

Ethel Tompkins: I'd say, well probably, maybe 30, 30, 31.

Suzanne Bonefas: Mm hmm. How did she manage teaching all the different grades, do you know?

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Ethel Tompkins: She just did. If you talk to a lot of the teachers that were back during that time, you will find that they, you know, had it all worked out. They managed to teach. In fact even before that time a lot of the white schools had one room schools and you had one teacher that taught grades usually maybe from one through seven or one through nine, and a lot of basics were a lot better back then too. Reading, writing, teaching you to write because in spite of everything that one teacher had more time to spend, you know, with each student, than they do in the larger high schools.

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Suzanne Bonefas: And I bet your independence paid off in that situation too.

Ethel Tompkins: Yeah, it helped a lot.

Suzanne Bonefas: Did you, did you read a lot when you were young?

Ethel Tompkins: When I could find reading material. For a long time the height of my time was when mom would find an old newspaper in some of the, that somebody from out of town had left in one of the cabins, and I mean as after I would buff the floors, I'd grab that paper and I'd sit in the corner and I'd read. It may be, you know, two or three weeks old, but to me it was still exciting reading about that, so I was a reader, the only one in the family. My dad says that in his memory that we'd read a lot.

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Suzanne Bonefas: And that must've been frustrating not to have material to read.

Ethel Tompkins: Not really frustrating because we, you know, when you don't have and you're not around people that have, you don't know that you're missing anything.

Suzanne Bonefas: You don't realize that. Now we sort of take it for granted here in the library.

Ethel Tompkins: Right.

Suzanne Bonefas: But, what other kind of activities did you, can you remember from your childhood? Did you do sports at all?

Ethel Tompkins: No, we didn't have sports during that time. You, let's see, mostly, I was an outdoor kid so most of mine consisted of when dad was a sharecropper I would, during the summertime, get up and, and go with him to the fields and I'd spend all day, you know, with him riding the tractor.

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If I couldn't go with him then it was just inventing different things to do, you know, around the house, in the yard and out playing with sticks. Just inventing things, letting your imagination run wild and just, you know whatever you could find to do.

Suzanne Bonefas: Did you have any role models you can think of from when you were growing up?

Ethel Tompkins: Not really because we didn't really have access to see, you know, the only people that we saw were just, you know, people in our, you know, immediate neighborhood. So as far as seeing what other people did, we didn't really have a chance to see that. So it's not like now where you got the TV, newspaper, magazines where they write about, you know, different people so you can see, hey, they can do it so can I type of things. We didn't have that then.

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So it was more what was instilled in you by your parents and maybe, you know, some of the people in your neighborhood.

Suzanne Bonefas: And you, you had very clear goals early on so –

Ethel Tompkins: My one goal was to get out of town. *(Laughter)*

Suzanne Bonefas: Get out of town, well, and there you have it.

Now I'd like to talk a little bit about our target period that kind of the 1950's to the 1970's so kind of the Civil Rights era. Can you just talk about one or two or three kind of meaningful things that happened during that period or that sort of defined that period for you as you look back?

Ethel Tompkins: One of the things that I remember as a very small child, one of the memories that sticks out in my memory is that, since dad was a sharecropper during the fall he would take the cotton to the gin into

Newport which was the next largest town, and I'd get to go with him. While being in the country we didn't know there was such a thing as segregation, integration, anything like that.

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I mean, we, everybody was so poor that nobody looked at anything, it was everybody worked together or everybody starved. But I wanted a drink of water and they had the divided water fountains which I didn't know anything about, but I just knew that there was a water fountain there and I wanted a drink of water. Now, you're talking a five or six year old child, and how the one that said colored on it was broken and so I went over to the other one and was going to go to the other one to get because I knew it was working, but dad said I couldn't drink out of that one. Well, you know, why not? I just want to get a drink of water.

Well, he could never explain to me why I could not get a drink of water out of that other fountain. So it wasn't until later that I really realized what segregation really was, and then I guess during the 70's time period, most of the 70's I spent in California and it makes a little bit of difference in that environment there. There was still a little bit of integration, but it was more, everybody, if you, you know, everybody thought you were weird. Anybody from California was considered strange. We were during the hippie era and as some of the, you know the Civil Rights movement, a lot of us were part of the Civil Rights movement, but we were not directly, I guess, connected with it because we didn't, you know, it's hard to have a personal feeling about something that you really don't know anything about, and you know, we knew it existed and unless you were lucky enough to travel to Mississippi, Alabama, you know, some of the other places that had real segregation and that were really fighting for Civil Rights, you know, you could kind of empathize with them, but you really couldn't, you know, really know what they were going through, type of thing.

So, you know, we did, you know, paperwork and pencil pushing and maybe a few phone calls, but as far as actually getting right in there and working for it, we really didn't, you know, do that as much as probably as we should have.

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But again, you're talking teenage, early 20's and it's, okay, I'll help you a little bit, but it's more about, you know, what am I going to wear or where am I going to have dinner? That type of thing.

Suzanne Bonefas: Well what you said about when you were young and being in the country and how that was kind of different. You mentioned real segregation sort of versus what you had in the country where people worked together, and you mean black and white people?

Ethel Tompkins: Uh huh. See there was no actual segregation when you're a sharecropper; the only defining line between when you're a sharecropper is the person that owns the land and the person that does it, that works for them. So, you know, that could be, you know, if you had, if you owned the land, then you were the boss. If you didn't own the land, it wasn't based on race or anything like that. It was based on whether or not your grandparents or whoever had money to buy land that passed it down to you. So as far as actual, you know, segregation and the Civil Rights movement, we didn't have anything like that back then.

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Suzanne Bonefas: And were there both white and black land owners then?

Ethel Tompkins: Mm hmm. Yes.

Suzanne Bonefas: Oh, and the workers were also both black and white during that period.

Ethel Tompkins: Mm hmm. We had rich people and poor people that were the only two classes and most of them were not distinguished between black and white. It was, you know, if you were poor, you were the worker. If you were rich, you had the money.

One of the largest land owners, in fact there's a city called Blackville just outside of Newport, the owner was black; _____ Black was his name. And he was the owner, he had most of the, all the land in that particular area. So that gives you an idea that if you, you know, were lucky enough to be able to get the land, then, you know, it made no difference whether you were black or white.

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Suzanne Bonefas: Well thinking a little bit then about when you were in school and when the schools were desegregated, can you talk a little bit about that and its effect on you?

Ethel Tompkins:

The one major effect, I guess, well maybe not really major, when the Brown versus Board of Education ruling came down from the Supreme Court, the Hoxie school system decided to integrate right then because they knew, being a poor area, they could not really effectively support two schools, which was the black school and the white school so the, the black schools, you know, kind of got lacking because they were, just really didn't have the resources to support the two schools equally. So when the ruling came down, so the Hoxie school board said, okay, let's put them all together and pool our money and, you know, be able to, you know, effectively, you know, support one school system.

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So during that particular time the school board members were the ones that got all of the hate letters and the threats and what have you. If you remember in a lot of the other cities, it was always the black families that got the brunt out of the resentment, the hate mail and everything, but in Hoxie is was different because the black community were not the one that were suing for the integration, it was the white community that was suing for integration.

So we were left alone. So when all the dust settled and everything, you know, all the legal things got taken care of and everything, so things settled down and we went back to school, one of the first things that I noticed was the fact they had a library. So therefore I could read any book that I wanted as long as I want and what have you, and also too the, the way the classes were set up because they had more people in one class than we had in our school, that we were used to. So that took a little bit of getting used to.

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But the students were nice so for me the transition was really not really a transition; it was trying, just getting used to more people, you know, in a section. So the integration really didn't have that much of an effect on me.

Now the younger kids, I understand, had a hard time getting used to, but they were younger, so you take a young child out of their safe environment, putting them into another environment, it makes no difference what kind of an environment, they're always going to have a hard time adjusting.

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Suzanne Bonefas: And you were high school age at that time I take it?

Ethel Tompkins: Uh huh.

Suzanne Bonefas: Right. So the effect on you mostly was you have more resources, is that right?

Ethel Tompkins: Mm hmm.

Suzanne Bonefas: And, and white students didn't give you a hard time or anything?

Ethel Tompkins: No.

Suzanne Bonefas: That was, they're, the –

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Now when the, when the black school closed, what happened to the teacher there? Did the teachers move or do you know that?

Ethel Tompkins: She went back to Little Rock because she was from Little Rock and so when the school closed she went back there.

Suzanne Bonefas: I often wonder what happens to the teachers when those kinds of things happen.

Ethel Tompkins: Most, in some of the other areas where they had the complete black school system and a white school system, most of the teachers I understand from that time were not integrated into the new school system.

Suzanne Bonefas: And your school was like that, I guess? It was all white teachers or –

Ethel Tompkins: Uh huh.

Suzanne Bonefas: How big was the school? You went from like a 30 student school to –

Ethel Tompkins: The whole schools, elementary and high school together it was probably, maybe seven to 800 students.

Suzanne Bonefas: Okay, so –

Ethel Tompkins: So it's not, you know, it wasn't really, you know, a large, large area, but then the, the town itself was not that big either. So we're still talking a small town versus the larger areas.

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Suzanne Bonefas: Can you tell us a little bit about leaving Arkansas? You went from Arkansas to California. What was that transition like?

Ethel Tompkins: It wasn't really, it was a total shock actually, but I didn't go, just move there, I joined the U.S. Navy when –

Suzanne Bonefas: Oh, okay.

Ethel Tompkins: - when, when I graduated from high school. I went to school one year in Little Rock at ____ College, but there wasn't enough funds, enough money to continue on, so I worked a little bit during the summer. I saw this sign that said "Join the Navy. See the world, and use the GI Bill." So the, that appealed to me about seeing the world and also being able to use the GI Bill to go to school. So I joined the Navy, spent four years there, and then when I, at the end of the four years, I used the GI Bill to go to school.

Suzanne Bonefas: Okay.

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Ethel Tompkins: So that's the time that I spent, yeah, that period of time in San Diego, and then when I got out I decided to move to Los Angeles which is about 225 miles away. So I packed up, came home for a week's vacation and then moved back to Los Angeles. I live at the Y, caught the bus looking for jobs and looking for an apartment because I didn't know anybody there. I found a job, found an apartment, and went on from there.

Suzanne Bonefas: Well I'm going to come back and ask you about that, but I'm interested in your time in the Navy. At that time were there many women?

Ethel Tompkins: Yeah, there was quite a few women. Now, the, the women did not have the, I guess, well, the same opportunity or reputation as they had now because it was considered, if you were a female in the Navy, then the civilian population considered you less than sterling

quality character-wise, because it was, it was frowned upon for women to be in the service.

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Now the service didn't really think, didn't classify them that way because having women in the service freed up the men to go to sea and, you know, in different positions because we filled the clerical roles and teaching positions and things like that, but the civilian community considered it the worst thing for a woman to think about going into the military.

So, but, I enjoyed, I had a great time. I see, most of my time was spent in San Diego as my duty station, but I got a chance to travel to places like Germany, Thailand, the Philippines, things like that.

Suzanne Bonefas: And were you in a mostly clerical role or were you –

Ethel Tompkins: No, not really. I, when I graduated from boot camp, I was to be an aircraft controller, that was my specialty, but when I got transferred to San Diego, the position that I was to fill at that time was not vacant, so they had to come up with something for me to do because they couldn't send me back. So for about six months I didn't do anything. I'd report for duty in the morning, I'm here, alive, and, you know, okay, if you need me, call me and I was free the rest of the day.

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After about six months I was assigned to the security department and I wrote traffic tickets, directed traffic, provided crowd control. I got tired of doing that and joined the armored guard. That was kind of fun. We got a chance to travel; we did parades and things like that. Then I went back to security and became an admiral's aide, I drove the admiral whenever he was in town. I'd get the, the base car, go to his house, pick him up, bring him to the base, and when he got done, take him back home. That was kind of fun, it got boring after a while, but it was still kind of fun to begin with.

Then I went back to security and that's where, when I, that's where I was when I got out, my enlistment ended.

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Suzanne Bonefas: Did you experience any kind of discrimination at all, either for being a woman or for being a black woman while you were there?

Ethel Tompkins: I was discriminated a little bit for being a woman. Now I understand from some of the people that had been there years before me, because by the time we were there, I don't know if it was just accepted that, okay, there are so many of them, we can't do anything about it, so they'd leave them alone type of thing. Or what the different consensus was, but the discrimination within the service itself was not, I don't know of any kind. I was not discriminated against being a female or being black, but around town it was still a little bit of the stigma of women in the military, there must be something wrong with them or they must have, you know, what other reason would a woman join the service? They gotta be running from something, somebody, or, you know, just their reputation was not good.

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Suzanne Bonefas: And that was around the time that the women's movement was kind of getting going. Did you feel any repercussions from that at all?

Ethel Tompkins: Just every so often you'd get a comment about; let's see how'd they term that, iron bra? Or something like that or they would ask you did you bring your bra or something like that. So, but not, nothing really because in the, I think in the Navy in the section that I was in, it was just that, if you could do your job, they didn't care, you know, whether you were male or female. You know, you could be short, black, and bald as long as you did your job, that's all they cared about.

Suzanne Bonefas: Well moving to your time in Los Angeles again, I want to come back to that, you lived at the Y and looked for a job and what kind of work did you eventually find?

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Ethel Tompkins: Well at the, well see the first job I found was a ____ typist. I worked for a manufacturing company. At that time I didn't have any experience, you know, of any kind of skills. I had to take, you know, whatever I could get, but I got the job as a typist for a manufacturing company, and I did that I guess for about maybe a year. And then I started looking around because they, I don't want to do this for the rest of my life, you know, kind of thing. And they had what they called a communications department there

where they had their own teletype. Being a manufacturing plant there, the place that made the uniforms that they sold was in Hattiesburg, Mississippi so there had to be communications between; you know the plant in California and the plant in Mississippi. So they had what they called the old teletype machine.

So I got to know the person that worked that, the teletype machine. Plus their hours, to me, were exciting, because they'd come to work, like, at 4:00 in the morning and they would go home, like, at 1:00 in the afternoon. I thought that might be kind of nice.

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So I got to know him and we'd sit and talk and on break time he showed me how to use the machine. So I knew how he taught me how to use it. So he went on vacation, he went skiing and he broke his leg, so they were, you know, the boss was saying, "What are we going to do, we have nobody to run the teletype machine. We're going to have to go out and try to find somebody." And I said, "Well, I can run it." And they said, "You can?" And I said, "Yeah, I know how." So that's how I got the job. I transferred to be the teletype operator.

That got me access to one of the security areas which was a, the computer room and I got to know the people there in the computer room, the computer operators and the key punch operators at that time. So looking around, I think this is more or less a glamour job, you know, this is still a little bit higher up. So I think I'd like to do that.

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So I, you know, would talk to them and see what kind of work they did. So I used the other half of my GI Bill to go to computer school. I went to Control Data Institute and there were two sections, you could become an operator or a programmer, and I looked in the newspaper and I see all these jobs for operators and I see all these jobs for programmers, so okay, so I'm thinking if I take the operator course, by the time I graduate, which would be in two years, there won't be any jobs there, all the jobs will be for programmers. But if I take the programmer job, you know, the

other way around. So I decided to take both courses at the same time, which was a mistake. (*Laughter*) I made it, but it was hard.

Because by taking both at the same time, I ended up with a little over 20 hours of class. I was still working full-time.

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On Monday, Wednesdays, and Fridays I went to school from six to ten and I went eight hours on Saturday so I have to say, it was hard. And I got about half way through and I'm thinking I need to drop one of these, and I think no you've made it this far, just hang on, just keep going, but I was dead tired when I got through. But I made it I got both of them done at the same time and I got a job in the computer room as an operator, computer operator. I worked nights, being the new person in the area, so they gave me the shift that nobody wanted. For two weeks I'd work from 4:00 in the afternoon until 8:00 and then the next two weeks I'd work from 8:00 until 4:00 a.m. And we just rotate every couple of weeks we'd rotate, and until I got tired of that, that shift, and knew that things were never going to be changed, so I, one Sunday morning I got up, got my newspaper and looked for jobs, and I started job hunting that Monday. I just took the day off, I didn't tell them what I was doing and applied at a company called Home Savings of America and went in to see the personnel director.

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Well the job that I went to interview for was just filled a couple hours before I got there, but she said I have this secretarial position if you want to go interview for it. And it's like; I don't want to be a secretary. I mean, they, my idea of a secretary was getting the boss coffee and answering the phone and typing letters, and she kept saying, "Well, why don't you go up in interview." So I said, okay, I got a little time. So I went up and interviewed with the person that needed the secretary and he was the new treasurer that they had hired for the company and I said, "Okay, before we get into this, you know, I don't want to waste your time, but I don't know anything about being a secretary." And he said, "That's okay, I don't know anything about being a boss either, I just got hired too." He was a folk singer (*Laughter*) that decided, a folk singer with a CPA so he decided, you know, he needed a steady income so he had gotten the job there at Home Savings.

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So we talked for a few minutes and he said, "When can you start?" And I said, "You can't be serious." I said, "I don't have, I don't know what to do. I don't know anything about setting up letters. I don't, I can type, but not business, professionally." He said, "Oh, that's fine, you can learn it." So he gave me a job, so I started working there. And then about a year later, different positions started opening up there. So I went from, I took a lot of the Savings and Loan Institute courses which the company provided free of charge and I learned how to be an accountant there and I transferred into the accounting department and became a budget analyst and then later a financial analyst, and I stayed there until 1982 and then I went to work for Hughes Helicopter as a data processor and what I did there was set up their desktop computer section

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When I started working there they had one desktop computer, when I left there about four years later we had over 500 and I had trained maybe 2,000 people how to use them.

Suzanne Bonefas: Wow, and that was in the very early days of desktop computing too.

Ethel Tompkins: Right.

Suzanne Bonefas: Wow.

Ethel Tompkins: The very beginning.

Suzanne Bonefas: What kind of computers did you have?

Ethel Tompkins: IBM.

Suzanne Bonefas: Old IBM's.

Ethel Tompkins: Yeah, everything, most things computer-wise was IBM's at that time. They didn't have any of the Apples or any of the other companies that they have now.

Suzanne Bonefas: Mm hmm. Now while you were in California, you had mentioned earlier, you were, you did some sort of phone work and organization and so on, were you a member of any organizations?

Ethel Tompkins: Not really a member of one. I did volunteer for different ones like they had, there were a couple that did voter registration

questionnaire type of thing. Are you registered to vote? Would you like to, you know, be registered, and kind of do surveys on things like that.

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To make sure that everybody was registered to vote so you had a chance to vote, you know, if you wanted to because there were so many that had not, had never registered and a lot of them didn't really, it wasn't really campaigned against, but it wasn't anything that was actively pursued for black people, you know as far as registering to vote, that type of thing. So, I would, you know, call and then help people, and then when an election was being held, I'd, you know, go out and picked them up. If you don't have a ride, I'll pick you up and take you to the polls that type of thing.

Suzanne Bonefas: And what was the organization that did that, do you remember?

Ethel Tompkins: I don't, I think it was actually based out of one of the churches there.

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Suzanne Bonefas: And so you did that for few years?

Ethel Tompkins: Uh huh, off and on for a few years. I was never really one for joining different organizations.

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I like to pick and choose. I mean, some organizations, they have some things that I believe in and go for, but they also have some things that I don't. It's just like, a two party political system, now I like to vote for the person not the party, because, but you can't do that, with the, you know, the way the American party is set up is that you're either Democrat or Republican or Independent. You can't vote for a person, you know, the way that I like to vote, and I was complaining about why can't I vote for that person well I don't like this one. It's not so much as I'm more Democrat than Republican, I'm more people because no matter, some people no matter what party they a part of, they're not good for the country or the economy. So, but because they are a member of the Democratic Party more, you know, then they're going to get voted for. So that's why I didn't join any specific organization. I think I kind of float around and if you're working a project that I like,

okay, then I'll help you this time, but as far as becoming a member of your organization, I wasn't ready for that and I'm still not totally for that.

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Suzanne Bonefas: But clearly, voting is important to you?

Ethel Tompkins: Yes, if you don't vote you have no right to complain.

Suzanne Bonefas: Mm hmm. And is that how you tried to convince people to register to vote?

Ethel Tompkins: Right, that's my one, excuse me I'm about to sneeze here. Allergies are acting up.

Suzanne Bonefas: Oh, no problem.

Ethel Tompkins: But, yeah, my thinking is that you can complain about the way things are done if you have voted. Now the person that you vote for, if they didn't win, it makes no difference. You know? You still have the right to complain or praise or do whatever, but if you did not vote, then you don't have the right to complain about the way things are done. So that's, you know, that's my belief and that's what I would tell people, that's what I tell people now. If you don't register and you don't go vote, then you have no right to complain.

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Suzanne Bonefas: So today, you're still –

Ethel Tompkins: Yeah, I still mention that. Voting is still, in spite of the way that we think and we talk and the way things seem, voting is still one of the basic rights that you can control, have the illusion of control of the way things are done or run.

Suzanne Bonefas: Do you feel like that has made a difference or have you seen that make a difference over your life?

Ethel Tompkins: I think it's made a lot of difference.

Suzanne Bonefas: Mobilizing people to vote and, can you talk about some of the difference that you've seen, or the -

Ethel Tompkins: Well I think that more people, when you think about voting, you become aware of the way things are done within your community or within the country, you know, what have you, whatever the issue may be. Okay, if you never think about voting, you never think about what's happening and what's going on, but the minute you, you know, when you think about voting, you think, okay, if I vote for this person, what's going to happen? Now, if I vote for that person, what's going to happen?

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So that makes you aware of what's going on and so now more people are aware so they have more of an idea what's happening, what's going on, and they, you know, actively pursue it.

Suzanne Bonefas: So being registered to vote really does help people participate more in –

Ethel Tompkins: Being registered, no not necessarily being registered. It's being registered and doing something about it, because a lot of people will go register just to shut you up, but (*Laughter*) but they won't actually go vote. So being registered and then voting, and I think once people, when a person votes and it really helps if the person, the thing that they're voting wins, then they think, okay, I have all this power, so that keeps them going and I think since more people are aware and more people are looking into the issues, they're just not voting because, you know, it happened to be the first item on the ballot. So things are being more things are being done to suit more people than they have in the past.

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Suzanne Bonefas: So you are seeing people empowered, do you feel like?

Ethel Tompkins: I think so.

Suzanne Bonefas: If you, say, look back to the Civil Rights era and today, do you think things have changed?

Ethel Tompkins: I think they have.

VIDEO CUT (.flv)
(35:16:00)

I think they have changed through voting and also through publicity. By that newspaper, more people have access to

newspapers, TV so they can; they are seeing more things, especially in the Civil Rights movement, Civil Rights era. So they are seeing things, okay, like, I live here, things are not that bad here because it's a small town and segregation is just not, not really an issue. One, there's nothing to be segregated from. I mean, you don't have a lot of things that, you don't have places to eat, you know, movies, things like that, so there's nothing to be segregated about.

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So without TV or papers people here never really know what segregation is all about, but with TV and newspapers you can see the way people are treated in Mississippi, you can see the way they're treated in Alabama. You know, there are different places where they really, truly have segregation, integration problem. So with the advent of communications, more people are aware of the problems that they're having in other places, even though they may not be affecting you, but you know if you care about people, you see the condition, the things that's happening to them so you want to help them change that, that situation.

Suzanne Bonefas: And so those communications have helped people understand things in their community as well as the larger world.

Ethel Tompkins: Right.

Suzanne Bonefas: I'm trying to think if there's something, there's something else I wanted to come back to and didn't. Oh, when did you become a librarian during all your many careers changes?

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Ethel Tompkins: In 1990 I was considering leaving, I was leaving in Los Angeles, you know, and I was considering leaving Los Angeles, packing up and moving someplace. The place that appealed to me most was Jackson Hole, Wyoming. It just had a nice ring to that (*crosstalk*) okay, I'll move there. Well in the mean time, I decided to come and visit one last vacation with mom and dad because I knew if I moved to a new place, it would be a while before I got vacation time so it would be a while before I could get back home. They were at an age where they really needed to have me a little bit closer or being able to help them. When you're elderly, you know, you read things, but you don't understand, you know, the modern technology, you know, because by the 90's things were, you had modern, what they would consider modern technology. Things

like microwaves and you know all these fancy things that we take for granted.

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To an older person it's still kind of scary. So just a few different little things that I knew they needed help with and it was, like, okay, how am I going to be able to help them if I'm so far away, but on the other hand the only kind of work here within a 40 or 50 mile radius was factory work, and nothing against factory work. I mean, they're important, but I had never done factory work and I didn't really want to start at, you know, at this particular time learning how to be a factory worker.

So I told dad, he was the main one pushing, you know, go ahead and stay, why don't you go ahead and stay. So I said, "Well, if I can find some kind of work, I'll go ahead and, you know, stay for a while." Well, in the meantime I was helping them fix up the house and do different little things that they didn't really know how to do and how to contact anybody to come and help them with and I had gone to the bank and I was talking to some of the people there at the bank, you know, the workers there, and somehow the conversation came about computers.

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So I, you know, we were talking about it and I was saying, you know, I know how to do this and do that, well they needed a person to come in in the evenings and do their data processing for them, and you're probably wondering how this gets to be the librarian –

Suzanne Bonefas: Oh, no (*Laughter*) (*crosstalk*) get there.

Ethel Tompkins: But they needed someone to do, come in and run their, their statements and do the savings –

Suzanne Bonefas: Can you tell us how you got to be a librarian?

Ethel Tompkins: After I had moved back here, come to visit actually because at that time I had not decided to move, being a reader I had spent quite a few hours in a day here at the library, coming to check out books and read the newspapers, and in a small town library you get to know everybody and talk to the librarians that were here and everything. So after about, I guess about four months, I had had a part-time job working at the bank from here, just a few hours a

day, that type of thing, and I was talking to one of the people that worked here, she was the accountant, bookkeeper more or less here, and we chit chatted back and forth and we went to lunch once or twice and she said, you know, they're going to be needing a bookkeeper pretty soon because she, she was leaving, and I said, "Oh, okay." Didn't think too much of it.

About a week later, the director of the library at that time gave me a call and she said, "I understand you're a bookkeeper?" And I said, "Yeah, I know bookkeeping." But bookkeeping was not my favorite thing to do anyway, but I knew how to do it, so she said, "Well, we're going to be needing a bookkeeper, and it's just a few days a week if you'd be interested in working here." So I thought okay, well go down and, go down and do the interview. So I came down for the interview, talked to her, we chit chatted, and as a result, I, she hired me as a bookkeeper.

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I was to work Monday, Wednesdays, and Fridays, and Saturday morning.

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So, okay, that's a few hours, and maybe I can handle that for a while, so I took the job. First month I worked, I worked Monday through Saturday noon; this was a part-time job now. So five and a half days a week. So after that then we settled on, she had me working four and a half days a week. So I did that, I worked; I did the bookkeeping and then worked out front at the front desk for a while. And then after several years, the state library who is the overall in charge of all the libraries in the state of Arkansas, decided to centralize all of the bill paying system, the accounting work and it was transferred to the county clerk's office.

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Well I knew that was coming and it was, like, okay, I was hired as a bookkeeper, so when that transfers, what's going to happen to me? I'm going to be without a job, right? So I'm thinking of that, well in the meantime, over a period of time, I had sort of become the, kind of the reference person anyway, just because I liked to know things and read things, so people would come and ask me different things and the students, when they were doing a report, they'd end up with me and I'd help them find the information. So

by the time the, my job was transferred to the clerk's office, I had more or less created another job for me because when I no longer had that to do I did more and more of the reference and then over time, that was, my job title was created because I knew where everything was and how to do everything. So that's how I became a reference librarian, that's how I got here. And I've been here since 1990.

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Suzanne Bonefas: Do you think you'll ever make it to; let's see where is it in Wyoming?

Ethel Tompkins: Oh, Jackson Hole?

Suzanne Bonefas: Jackson Hole.

Ethel Tompkins: Eventually, probably. I'll at least visit there because I still, I guess it still, it just has an adventurous ring to it. Like someplace –

Suzanne Bonefas: It does.

Ethel Tompkins: Now the only time, the only thing is though, what I, I considered it, but I wasn't really sure how I was going to work it out was the fact that in the winter time, it's down to sometimes almost 20 below zero there, in some parts of it.

Suzanne Bonefas: Oh. Oh. *(Laughter)* Well that would give you pause.

Ethel Tompkins: Yes, see having come from, from Southern California moving directly there, even though I considered it in thinking okay, it's, everybody has to hibernate during the winter time so I won't be the only one that's cold all the time.

Suzanne Bonefas: But still, that's awful cold.

Ethel Tompkins: Yeah, that's real cold.

Suzanne Bonefas: Is there anything else I haven't asked you about that you'd like to talk about?

Ethel Tompkins: Well I think basically, all the basic high points have been covered, and again it's one of those things to where I never really consider the things that I know or have done as being part of the Civil Rights movement, more or less.

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It just never really occurred to me, you know, that I'm part of history, but, you know, but then if you really think about it, I really am. All of us are really part of history. And so as far as, I think you probably covered just about everything I can think of. You know, more than likely though, as usually happens, a day after you're gone, I'll probably think, oh hey, I should have told them about, but yeah.

Suzanne Bonefas: Well you can always call me up and tell me if you think of something I'd appreciate it.

Ethel Tompkins: Okay.

Suzanne Bonefas: Well thank you so much, I appreciate you taking the time.

Ethel Tompkins: You're very welcome. Okay. Glad that you thought, considered interviewing me.

Suzanne Bonefas: Well, we, this is going to be a real addition to our collection.

Ethel Tompkins: Okay. Thank you.

Suzanne Bonefas: Thank you so much. So –

00:44:55:20

[End of audio]