Mildred Ransom

A Transcription
Of An Oral Interview

808 Holiday Drive
Champaign, Illinois
June 30, 1983

Interviewed by
Melinda Roundtree
Patrick Tyler

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Introduction

This is an interview with Mrs. Mildred Ransom, the present principal of the Yankee Ridge Elementary School in Urbana. She was principal of the Webber Elementary School before its closing in 1980. Mrs. Ransom has been a psychologist for the Urbana School District for several years. She's been in the Champaign area since 1961. Mrs. Ransom was born in Chicago on June 20, 1937.

This interview is being conducted on June 30, 1983, in the home of Mrs. Ransom, located at 808 Holiday Drive, Champaign. The interviewers are Patrick Tyler and Melinda Roundtree, representing the Urbana Free Library Archives Department.

Tyler: Mrs. Ransom, our first question we would like to ask you is about your early life. Could you give us some information about, you know, your childhood, you know, about where you was raised, about your parents?

Ransom: How far back do you want me to go?

Tyler: As far as back to your birth, where you was born and about your childhood experiences.

Ransom: Okay, I was born in Chicago, Illinois. My mother was born in Chicago. My father was born in Louisiana, but he left there when he was about two and he moved to Chicago with all of his sisters and brothers. And I was born at home, and so was my younger sister, which is unusual for Chicago, but my mother didn't want to go to a hospital. She didn't want her babies mixed up on her, so we were both born at home, and this is around 59th and State Street in Chicago.

We stayed there and then we were one of the first occupants to move into a housing project in Chicago. It's the Ida B. Wells. And heretofore they had not had housing projects, and we really, really enjoyed living there. Kids were everywhere – we just had a ball. We would wake up in the morning playing and go to bed playing.

When we were about, I think I was about 12 or 13 years old, we moved to Idlewild, Michigan, which is a black community up in Michigan. It's way up in the woods hidden. I think that maybe in the wintertime there're about 900 people

living there, in Idlewild itself no more than 200 or 300 people. And I don't know how much you know about Idlewild, but it used to be a famous black resort. It's not anymore because of integration, but anyway when I was growing up, it was a famous black resort. And I got used to living in the woods. It was very different from living in Chicago with streetlights, you know, and going up to the woods where they have outhouses and no electricity, and it was very different.

Anyway, I spent, oh, four or five years up there, and graduated from high school. Twenty-one kids were in my high school class. I was valedictorian, the first time a black had ever been valedictorian. And, of course, there was a little trouble about that, but I had one teacher who said, "It will be." And I don't know what happened, you know, how it is when teachers go behind closed doors. Anyway it worked out.

And then I had a scholarship to Western Michigan University, but I didn't want to go. I thought it was too big, so I went to Grand Rapids Junior College, and from there I went to Eastern Michigan. And after that I taught a few years, then came to Champaign-Urbana, met my husband, got married. And we've been here ever since.

Tyler: What year did you come to Champaign?

Ransom: I came here in 1961.

Tyler: And you met your husband, _____?

Ransom: Yes, I met him about three weeks after I got here. No, I'm sorry, one week after I got here. I came down here not knowing one soul. I had worked on this job, it's a research job in Michigan, and the director was a psychologist. And he said, "Millie, you've got to go down to the University of Illinois. I have this friend down there who is on the staff and you just, you have to go to graduate school." And I thought, okay, I didn't have anything else to do.

Detroit was great, I was living in Detroit then having a ball, partying all the time, but I said okay. So, I drove down here, and I had no idea it was so far down here. And I came down here not knowing a soul, and I met Myrtle Moreland. I don't know if you've heard of the Moreland family, but she was the secretary at one of the schools, and at the Board of Education.

I also met, I can't think of his name, but he, the Urban League Director in Grand Rapids directed me to this man down here. He's Dave. . . I can't think of Dave's last name. Anyway, I didn't have a place to stay, and so I went over to meet this old fellow and he was so gracious and so kind and he told me a lot about Champaign-Urbana. He told me that I would have a lot of difficulty finding a place to stay. I met Myrtle Mooreland, and she told me the same thing, but I didn't believe them. Go ahead.

Tyler: Why did they say that you would have a lot of difficulty of finding a place to stay?

Ransom: Because this was back in 1961, and black people were not allowed to live wherever they wanted in Champaign. There were only certain homes we could live in, and certain places we could live. And I was from Detroit where I'd had my own apartment, I was very independent and I didn't want to live in somebody else's home. I wanted to go out and find my own apartment and set up my own lifestyle, and they all warned me, you know, it's going to be very hard. I found out. (Laughs.) I certainly found out. And Myrtle Moreland laughed and she said, "Well, honey, I'm glad you come on home." And she was able to find me an apartment.

That first week I met my husband. Oh, Myrtle Moreland had taken me out bowling and I met him. And that was in September, and we got married in June. We went to Boston for a year, because he was graduating as an engineer. We lived out there, and he decided that he wanted to come back to Champaign-Urbana to go to graduate school. We came back and except for the year or eight months we were in London, we've been here ever since.

Tyler: I want to talk about your education. You said you graduated from what high school?

Ransom: Baldwin High School up in Baldwin, Michigan. It's a little town that nobody's ever heard of. (Laughs.)

Tyler: I haven't heard of it. Let me see, and then you went to college?

Ransom: I went two years to Grand Rapids Junior College, then I went to Eastern Michigan University in Ypsilanti. And then, I started taking grad courses, you know, in the evening, one from the University of Michigan, and one from Eastern Michigan, you know how you do in the evening.

Tyler: What was your major?

Ransom: Special education, emotionally disturbed, and mentally handicapped. And I didn't finish it there because the job ended, so I came here to go to graduate school. I'm trying to think . . . it's been so long. My masters was in special ed., I think. Yes, it was, and then I did advanced degree work in school psychology until I got that, until I got certified. And then I went back and did all of my doctoral work in ed. administration. Okay? (Laughs.)

Tyler: That's a lot of education.

Ransom: Yes, it is, but it's in the past now and I just kind of, you know, you forget about it. You don't forget the training, but you forget all the hard work that was involved.

Tyler: You know, going to school and trying to get a lot of education, especially back in them times, you know, being black, could you tell us about you know how

hard was your classes, you know, was it hard and how your teachers treated you?

Ransom: I never had any trouble because of my color, at least none that I was aware of. In graduate school toward when I was in the doctoral program, I had difficulty because I was a woman. And being in ed. administration I can remember one class I was in, there were twenty men, and I was the only woman. And one of my teachers or advisors did not particularly think that a woman should be in ed. administration – at least not in those days – and I think that was where I really had the trouble. He would write something one way, and tell me something different. And then when I would go to the files or somebody else who was more in my corner would look at it, they would say, "Oh, you say one thing but that's not what he wrote down." And so, I was able to find out that there were some discrepancies. I changed advisors and things worked out a lot easier.

Tyler: During the civil rights movement with Martin Luther King were you in school at that time?

Ransom: Let's see, that was back in the early sixties, the middle sixties. Yes, I was in school during that time. I think I was, 1964 or 1965, somewhere around there, I was finishing up my masters. We had bought our first home, and I think I was doing my internship as a school psychologist. Yes, I was in school.

Tyler: Did you have any setbacks because of the civil rights movement?

Ransom: No, no. We had some interesting times at our house, because my husband was on the faculty then, and a lot of the black students had come for the first time. Do you know Dean Shelly, either one of you, Clarence Shelly?

Roundtree: I've heard of him. His wife's Dorothy Vickers Shelly?

Ransom: Yes, they came about that time, ‘67, ‘68, because the university said "Ah, ha, we have a commitment. We're going to recruit black students." And Dean Shelly came and they brought in all of these students 700 or 800 of them and that was our first taste of students rebelling. And my husband was on the faculty and we used to have meetings at our house, different black faculty members would have meetings to discuss how they could help the students get along better in school and things like that. But some of the students didn't understand it and they would get mad with the black faculty so they would march on black faculty members and all. It got to be wild, very wild. And then some of the gangs in the North End got mad with some of the students sometimes when their parties didn't always click. Some of the students would say, "You know, hey you know, it's okay, but don't come into this party." And some of the fellas would get really mad and they would set up fights. It wasn't too pleasant all the time. It was the gangs more than anything. I don't know if the gangs are still in existence

here in Champaign-Urbana. There was a time when they were very strong. I think you all were too young to know about them.

Roundtree: I remember some of them when I was younger at King Park they had gangs and they'd come around then and start fighting and shooting and everybody would start running. I remember things like that.

Ransom: Right, right. I can remember my hairdresser just getting so mad. Most of the people in town would get mad when the gangs would start acting up, because then the police would just come all around and people weren't free to go up and down the streets and couldn't go out at night, it was pretty bad.

Tyler: So after you earned your masters there was an internship?

Ransom: After I got my masters, that was in special ed, then I had to go back and get some additional training in school psychology. And that took about another year and then I had to do a whole year's internship. I had to work full time as a school psychologist under supervision, reduced pay, to prove that I could do the work.

Tyler: At what school district?

Ransom: Urbana.

Tyler: What school did you work at?

Ransom: Let's see, I think I. . . That's when I was going to all the schools. And I was also pregnant with Trisha, my first child.

Tyler: After your internship what other job?

Ransom: Then I became a school psychologist, and I worked part time then, because by then Trisha was born and I didn't want to work full time with a little baby. And so I worked as a school psychologist until I became principal at Webber School.

Tyler: Can you tell us about any outstanding things that happened at Webber while you were principal?

Ransom: Nothing outstanding, except that I think that it was a fantastic school. We started a new program there that had never been started before anyplace, and that was, we took in extremely handicaps, severely handicapped children into the public schools. Heretofore they'd been in institutions, in church basements, church programs, private schools and the thought was they can come to public schools, so they came in wheelchairs, they came crawling. They

came, a 21-year-older who couldn't speak, just all kinds of ways into the public school, five classrooms and we integrated them into the school. They went to lunch with the other kids, they went on to recess. We had assemblies together and it proved to this community as well as to the state and now it's an international program that it could be done. It was just a fantastic experience. The program is now at Prairie and they also have a class at Urbana Junior High.

Roundtree: My sister was telling me something about that. She goes to Urbana Junior High School, telling about kids that have multiple sclerosis and stuff.

Ransom: That's right. Oh, and those were some fun times because these kids had never been in public school before, some of their teachers had never taught in public schools and most of the teachers at Webber had taught in the public schools for a very long time and so we were bringing them all together. Plus some of these non-handicapped kids had never been around handicapped kids before, and to see kids in wheelchairs or to see a child having an epileptic seizure. They didn't know how to handle it at first but within I'd say a month or two months, it was fantastic to see the non-handicapped kids helping their handicapped friends and they would get mad. "That's my friend." It really worked – good experience.

Tyler: So after Webber closed, what year did Webber close?

Ransom: I don't know. When you get older, the dates run together. I think it was in 1980, I think, or maybe it was 1979. I'm not sure.

Tyler: You weren't principal when it closed, were you?

Ransom: Yes.

Tyler: You were principal when it closed.

Ransom: I lost my job.

Tyler: So, where did you go after that?

Ransom: They placed me as a school psychologist again. And so I worked for two years, this time at King and at Leal. And Margaret Dees, who was then principal at Yankee Ridge, said she was going to retire and I was named as principal at Yankee Ridge.

Tyler: (Laughs.) That's a lot of history of jobs.

Ransom: (Laughs.) I've been working a very long time.

Roundtree: What day were you born?

Ransom: Was I born? June 20th. You don't need the year do you?

Roundtree: Yes.

Ransom: No, my, I always tell my birthday because other people tell it anyway. 1937.

Tyler: I was going to say, I guess my mother's age.

Ransom: Oh, no. (Laughs.) I always tell it.

Tyler: I'd like to talk a little bit about the community, Champaign-Urbana. Since you've been here, what kind of changes has the community been through?

Ransom: So many, in so many different ways. I think it was so gradual that I perhaps wasn't aware of it until it happened. I think for me, one of the things that I've noticed, because I'm black, is the change in living conditions for black people, the way we're treated, the open access that we have to things. It's not perfect, but right now it's so much better than when I came in 1961. When I first came here in 1961, I was ready to pack my car up and leave, go back to Detroit. I had never seen prejudice as open as I saw it here. It's still here, but it's gone

underground a little bit more. When I first came here in 1961, my principal, you know because they recruited me, they wanted me to come here, he said, "Don't worry about a place to stay." He said, "Right across the street from the school, there's a lady who has apartments. I'll take you over and introduce you. You'll get a place to stay." And sure enough, he took me over there and the lady was nice, shook my hand and he said, "Now, you'll get Mrs.," I was Miss _____ then, "You'll get her all set up." "Oh, yes dear. Come back at 3 o'clock." So I went on and did a few things and I came back at 3 o'clock and when I got back at 3 o'clock, she said, "You're colored, aren't you?" She was so smooth. And I said, "Yes." I said, "I'm a Negro." That's what we used in those days, and she said, "Well, I have a Chinese fellow living here and he wouldn't want to live with you." And I was a bit taken aback, so she would not let me rent that apartment. Now my principal had thought he had it all set up.

When we first went to look for our first house, my husband and I in 1965, they would not show us any homes unless they were repossessed homes in certain areas, like across from Kraft. There were two or three repossessed homes there where walls had been kicked in, fixtures dangling, just a mess, realtors would not show us any other homes. We had one friend, she's a white realtor, who didn't believe in that. They had started a group called C.C.I., and she showed us several homes and all the other realtors in town blacklisted her. Would not let her show some of their homes. That's done with now. You know, if you have the money in Champaign-Urbana, you can almost buy any home you

want. And realtors will show you homes. Back then they would not. That's one of the major changes.

Also, in employment, when we first came here to town, we didn't see black people working anywhere. You just didn't work, but now you can go into banks and see black people working, you can go into department stores, you can go into restaurants, so the employment picture has improved. I think another area that's improved is the university seeks or gets involved in the black community more. When I first came here, there was just a difference. The university didn't get involved, I'm talking about the white university, they didn't go out and seek blacks trying to come into the university, trying to get blacks involved, trying to spread history, there was none of that then. That's all about the black part. Is there any other part that you want to know? Those are the things that strike me the most.

Tyler: How about some of the things, your involvement in the community? Any organizations or anything?

Ransom: Oh my. Yeah. (Laughs.) I'm not involved right now, but over the years I have been. Let's see, I was on the Champaign Human Relations Commission. We were a part of C.C.I. before it closed down. C.C.I. was that group many, many years ago that tried to get open housing for black people. I always paid my dues to Urban League. I haven't been very active, but I've always paid dues, gone to a few meetings, and I've done the usual things with the

children, Brownies. My professional organizations. There was something else, oh, room mother at the school, those kinds of things, P.T.A., vice-president along with my husband, and then as I said, my professional organizations. And years ago, when we first came we started a Black Social Club because we needed some social life, so we've been involved in that.

Tyler: Is it still going?

Ransom: Yeah, it's called the Saturday Nighters. It's quite old now, 18 or 19 years old by now.

Roundtree: What kinds of things do you do in this club?

Ransom: Oh, it's purely social. (Laughs.) That's all, that's the only purpose, yeah. We all were involved in other things, ah I said the Urban League and C.C.I. We all had our other civic groups so this was just to get together, let our hair down and have fun.

Tyler: Any other questions?

Roundtree: How do you like being principal? What kind of things have you encountered with the kids?

Ransom: (Laughs.) The kids are fine. It's really no hassle. Kids have their problems, they get into trouble. I like discipline and I like well-disciplined children and being a principal I like discipline cases to come to the office because as surely as I discipline a child one day, within the next two or three days I'll find an opportunity to turn it around. You know, if I have to really rack some kid up for something, within two or three days there'll be a paper that he's done right or he'll do something, or she'll do something very nice so we have a chance to have a positive relationship. Kids are just fine. They're bright, eager, capable kids. We have our medium kids and we have our slow kids and we just try to do the best with all of them.

Roundtree: Do you have anything you can offer us or black young kids growing up?

Ransom: Being an educator, you know what I'm going to say. (Laughs.) Go to school, work hard, study hard, and don't get discouraged no matter what happens, just have to keep working away. I think if I could say anything, it's not to use cop-outs. I get so mad when the black kids come in to me and say "so-and-so is prejudice, so-and-so is mean to me." That may very well be, but it happened to me, it happened to my folks, it's going to happen to their kids, so what? You know when you grow up and you go to work somebody is always going to be mean to you but how do you handle it? If I run in there and handle it for you fine, it'll take care of it for the moment, but you aren't learning to handle it.

I think kids should never use those cop-outs. If a person is prejudiced or mean, just work a little harder you know try to rise above it. Because that person is going to only be with you one year, maybe six months, but if you have the skills to cope then you have skills that will take you beyond that person that will help you to achieve. I think that's what I'm trying to do with those kids you know as much as I can, teach them coping skills.

Tyler: You really helped them a lot.

Ransom: Now there was some people, you know, I know you know some people who are really on your case all the time, and sometimes you just want to scream. You know it gets to be too much. I've had it when I was in school and all, but you can't make those people go away. They have it. They are there. So what do you have to do? You have to try and work around them, rise above them whatever you need to do to get on with it. Don't, though, let them discourage you so much that you give up. Then you won't get anywhere. I feel that very strongly. I tell this to kids all the time.

Tyler: I'm curious what gave you the motivation to get all your education?

Ransom: I think as much as anything, my mother did. Well, the whole family always preached it. My father's kind of laid back, if you get your education okay, if you don't okay, you know. He said, "You just go to work. You aren't going to

stay here at home, you can go to work whatever you do." My mother kept preaching education, education, education. I think because she had wanted it and she didn't. She graduated from high school, she went to junior college in Chicago for a while and then when she got married and had us, she didn't and she didn't work. She now, after we were grown, she went back to school and got her bachelors and her masters and she taught school. But she's the one who preached it, day in and day out, go to school, go to school. And then when I graduated from high school, I said, "Okay, mother, I will go to school," and at first, you know, it was okay, but then I really got hooked on it.

Roundtree: The high school that you went to, was it predominately black or mixed?

Ransom: No, it was mainly white, because the town was white and then they brought in kids from all these outlying areas into the school. And because Idlewild was a black community, then they brought in a lot of the black kids to go to high school. There's not a lot of strong encouragement in high school, a lot of kids dropped out. You know, in those days, nobody went out to get them, if you were 14 and dropped out, okay. You know, no big deal.

Roundtree: So you had the urge to go on.

Ransom: Yes. Well, my mother had that urge for me to go on. Right.

Roundtree: She urged you?

Ransom: Right, and my grandmother did, and my grandfather. As I said my father just said, "You're going to work. Either you go to work or you go to school, one or the other."

Tyler: You had said there wasn't much encouragement for the black children to go on and get an education?

Ransom: Not in my high school, no.

Tyler: How about in the Urbana School District today? Is there much encouragement?

Ransom: I think from individual people there are. I think of Henry Mears. I worked with him at the Junior High School and sometimes we would sit down and just pull our hair out, we wanted our kids, when I say our kids we wanted the black kids, to do well so badly we would just (sigh) we wished that we could, in some way do it, but you can't walk around and open little heads you know and pour in all this motivation. When Henry would see the kids walking through the hallway on their way to class without a pencil or a book, he would get mad and

then he would say, "Take your books to class. Take your pencils to class." I think that there are individuals like that and it need not be a Henry Mears, it could be a white teacher or a white administrator, whoever, there's some people I think who encourage the kids. I think the strongest encouragement has to come from the homes, and from their own peer group. I don't know if it's like it was when I went to school, but sometimes some of the kids would put you down if you studied too much. Is it still like that?

Roundtree: Yeah, I find that now in college. Some people will say, "You something else. You always reading."

Ransom: Right.

Tyler: It makes it feel like you're too smart.

Ransom: Right, that's what I, yup, I faced that and when I was at Urbana Junior High, I would face that with some of the kids. Some of the kids would come in, you know, I was always encouraging them to come in and talk at lunch time. "Oh, so-and-so thinks she's so smart or _____ or something." I'd say, "Why do you say that?" They'd say, "Oh, she's always studying or reading, or something, she wants to make good grades or he wants to make good grades." And I would take a deep breath.

[End of taped interview.]