**Oral History Interview**

**with**

**Mary Crawford**

Interview Conducted by

Juliana Nykolaiszyn

August 9, 2014

Spotlighting Oklahoma

Oral History Project

**Oklahoma Oral History Research Program**

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**Interview History**

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The recording and transcript of this interview were processed at the Oklahoma State University Library in Stillwater, Oklahoma.

**Project Detail**

The purpose of the *Spotlighting Oklahoma Oral History Project* is to document the development of the state by recording its cultural and intellectual history.

This project was approved by the Oklahoma State University Institutional Review Board on April 15, 2009.

**Legal Status**

Scholarly use of the recordings and transcripts of the interview with Mary Crawford is unrestricted. The interview agreement was signed on August 9, 2014.

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**About Mary Crawford…**

Mary Crawford was born in 1932 in Vinita, Oklahoma. She had two brothers and one sister. Mary attended Attucks School 1937 through 1949. She started working at the age of fifteen at such places as the Boatright store, Scotty’s Hamburgers and Clanton’s. After getting married she moved around some living in Michigan, Los Angeles and Denver before returning to Vinita, Oklahoma.

When she returned to Vinita she began to work toward getting Attucks School on the *National Register of Historic Places* and this was accomplished with the help of other Attucks School supporters. She also helped get the school alumni incorporated and served as president for four years. Mary continues to be on the board and continues to have fond memories of her time spent in Attucks School.

The Attucks School District was established in 1900, and Attucks School, a two-story brick school was built in 1916-17. It housed grades one through twelve and served the educational needs of African Americans in Vinita, Oklahoma. In 1939 the Works Progress Administration (WPA) built a gymnasium for the school. Following the 1954 *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision, the school was desegregated. The building is on the National Register of Historic Places. The alumni of the school have a reunion every two years.

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| **Mary Crawford**  Oral History Interview  Interviewed by Juliana Nykolaiszyn  August 9, 2014  Vinita, Oklahoma | C:\Users\nykolai\Desktop\IMG_0703.jpg |

**Nykolaiszyn** *My name is Juliana Nykolaiszyn with the Oklahoma State University library. Today is August 9, 2014 and we’re in Vinita, Oklahoma, interviewing Attucks School alumni. With me is Mary Crawford. Thank you for joining us today.*

**Crawford** You’re welcome.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Mary, could you tell me the year you were born and where you were born?*

**Crawford** Nineteen thirty-two in Vinita, Oklahoma.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Tell me a little bit about your parents.*

**Crawford** My father, he was named Carl Kirkendoll. He was a construction worker and then he worked in the laundry here in Vinita. He helped work on the Grand River Dam when they put that in down there. My mother [Pauline], she did housework for about twenty years to some people called Terrells and they ran the hatchery.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Okay, and how did your parents come to Vinita?*

**Crawford** Well, they lived out at Ketchum and migrated into Vinita.

**Nykolaiszyn** *And describe where you lived as a child.*

**Crawford** On 611 East Tahlequah. Born and raised there, and in fact it wasn’t but two black families live on that street and that was my grandmother across the street and our house. I had all playmates on that street. It wasn’t like any segregation to us over there.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Okay, and describe the house for me. How many rooms, what it was like…*

**Crawford** We had a porch and one…two…the front room, bedroom, dining room, kitchen. That was all.

**Nykolaiszyn** *And did you have siblings? Brothers and sisters?*

**Crawford** I had two brothers at that time.

**Nykolaiszyn** *And where did you fall? Were you the oldest, the youngest?*

**Crawford** I was the youngest, but later on my mother had another child that was a girl, but I was gone, grown then.

**Nykolaiszyn** *And so growing up what did you do for fun?*

**Crawford** Well, we’d go down to Bull Creek and fish and catch crawfish and have picnics. At that time you could take—say like fifteen cents. All the kids in the neighborhood would get together and put their pennies together. We’d go to the store, Charlie Smith’s store, and get five cents worth of bologna and two cents worth of crackers, go down on Bull Creek and play.

**Nykolaiszyn** *And have a good time.*

**Crawford** Have a good time all day long.

**Nykolaiszyn** *And, you know, growing up, were you thinking about what you wanted to be when you got older?*

**Crawford** Yeah, I always thought I wanted to be a truck driver, but I didn’t.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Why a truck driver?*

**Crawford** I don’t know. It was just in my mind that that’s what I wanted to be.

**Nykolaiszyn** *(Laughs) Did you work growing up at all?*

**Crawford** Yes, I started working when I was like fifteen. I worked for the Boatright’s when I was a teenager. Boatright Store. I don’t know, lots of places, restaurants: Scotty’s, cooked there, Clanton’s, cooked at Clanton’s. Then I got married and moved to Michigan, and I worked there. We moved to a lot of places trying to decide where we was going to live. I lived in Los Angeles for eight years. I lived in Denver for fifteen years.

**Nykolaiszyn** *And here you are back in Vinita.*

**Crawford** Back in Vinita, after my husband died. We had property in Tulsa so I came back, and we weren’t together, and sold the property and decided to come to Vinita. Worst mistake I ever made.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Really?*

**Crawford** Yes.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Okay. Well, can you describe what the town was like when you were younger?*

**Crawford** Well, you couldn’t go in the front and eat at places, you know, and stuff, use the bathrooms and different stuff like that. You had to eat in the back. To me it was okay because it didn’t make me no difference. All my friends that I played with were little white girls, you know, because they lived in our neighborhood.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Did you attend church growing up?*

**Crawford** Every Sunday, all day long, and through the week. Yes.

**Nykolaiszyn** *What church did you go to?*

**Crawford** I started out at Sunrise Baptist Church, which is now Serenity. Then I started going down to the First Baptist Church with my grandmother.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Okay, well…*

**Crawford** And I still attend it, but it’s changed its name: UNBC.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Well, when you were going to school at Attucks, can you tell me the years you attended? What year did you start at Attucks?*

**Crawford** Nineteen thirty-seven.

**Nykolaiszyn** *And what year did you graduate?*

**Crawford** Forty-nine.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Forty-nine. Okay, and did you start in the first grade?*

**Crawford** Primary.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Primary, okay. Let’s start with your primary school. Tell me about your teachers and what you remember from that time?*

**Crawford** My primary teacher was Mrs. Shade. She did primary, first, and second grade. You had a little red table, round red table, for the primary kids. During that time—I could read and write before I even went to school. So I skipped from the primary to the second grade, and then from the second grade to the third grade.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Wow.*

**Crawford** Because you didn’t start school until you were six.

**Nykolaiszyn** *So were you learning how to read and write at home?*

**Crawford** At home, yes.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Who taught you?*

**Crawford** My mother and my grandmother.

**Nykolaiszyn** *So education was very important to them?*

**Crawford** Yes. My mother only finished the eighth grade, but she was very smart.

**Nykolaiszyn** *So how would you get to school?*

**Crawford** Walk! All the way from the north part of town clear to the south part.

**Nykolaiszyn** *How long would it take you?*

**Crawford** Oh, about thirty minutes. Everybody that lived in the north end would meet up on the corner and we all walked together.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Rain or shine?*

**Crawford** Rain or shine. Yes, snow…there was a school, the Riverside School, but that was for whites. We couldn’t go to it, so we had to walk all the way, probably a mile and a half.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Did you pass it on the way?*

**Crawford** Yeah.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Okay. Pack a lunch?*

**Crawford** Yes.

**Nykolaiszyn** *What would you take for lunch?*

**Crawford** Sometime it might be bacon and egg sandwich, peanut butter sandwich, whatever.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Would you ever trade with your friends?*

**Crawford** Yeah. One boy that was in my class, he and I were the youngest two, and his mother made homemade bread all the time. He would trade me his homemade bread with ham on it for an egg sandwich. Delicious.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Different today.*

**Crawford** Yes.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Well you mentioned Mrs. King [Ethel Shade King Masion Ford], your primary teacher…*

**Crawford** Yes.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Okay, can you talk about some of the teachers you remember?*

**Crawford** Oh yeah, then after I left her room I went to the next room which was Mrs. Vivian Terrell. She was the music teacher. She did third and fourth grade and music to everybody. Then you leave that room and you went upstairs to the fifth and the sixth grade was Ms. Clara Hardrick. She was an artist. She did stuff like that. Then when you leave that room you went to Mr. Ryan’s room. That was science. That was seventh and eighth. Then when you get into the high school you go downstairs to the professor’s room which was ninth, tenth, eleventh, and twelfth. You just switch out of rooms.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Were there any teachers that really just stick out in your mind for, you know, either a good experience you had with them or maybe a negative experience you had with them?*

**Crawford** Yeah, Ms. Armstead. I loved Ms. Armstead. She was a very good teacher and whatever she gave you to learn, if you missed some of it, if you missed two questions on there she put your name on the board. And before Friday evening you had to come in there and get it off, get your name erased off.

**Nykolaiszyn** *They were tough.*

**Crawford** Very tough, yes.

**Nykolaiszyn** *What about discipline?*

**Crawford** Well, we were all disciplined. Yeah, you got whippings, spankings, with a paddle.

**Nykolaiszyn** *What would you have to do to get a spanking or a paddling?*

**Crawford** Talking in class and stuff like that—disrupting.

**Nykolaiszyn** *That would never happen to you?*

**Crawford** No, I never was a disrupter. (Laughter)

**Nykolaiszyn** *Would teachers do other duties outside of teaching?*

**Crawford** Huh?

**Nykolaiszyn** *Would teachers perform other duties either outside the classroom or in the school?*

**Crawford** I didn’t mention we had a home economics room...

**Nykolaiszyn** *Okay.*

**Crawford** …which I loved very much. We were taught a lot of stuff in there, taught how to can, sew. We did sewing, and CPR [Cardio Pulmonary-Resuscitation]. We learned a lot of stuff in there. Her name was Vivian Clay.

**Nykolaiszyn** *What about the principal?*

**Crawford** Principal Blye, he was a very stern man, very nice man.

**Nykolaiszyn** *How was he regarded by the students?*

**Crawford** Very nice.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Okay. So describe a typical day in high school for me.*

**Crawford** Well, you get there and you go into his room and then you’re leaving there and you go upstairs to Ms. Armstead’s room for spelling and prose and poetry and history, all of that. Then by that time it’s probably lunchtime. You go down in the lunchroom and eat your lunch. Go back up, go to your main room and take off again to some other room.

**Nykolaiszyn** *And then what would you do after school?*

**Crawford** Well, we would go all through town. There was about four of us girls that lived in the north end, we’d go through town. There was a donut shop and we’d stop and smell the donuts. Go on down by the post office, there was a park there that had a water thing and we’d sit there on that. Then we’d go on up through to the ice plant and the man would give us a snowball out of the ice plant. Then we’d head on home.

**Nykolaiszyn** *That sounds pretty good.*

**Crawford** Then on Saturday everybody met down at Bull Creek, to play.

**Nykolaiszyn** *So could you describe what a classroom looked like?*

**Crawford** Yeah, it was desks you know, and you had your little inkwell. Then you put your books up under there, and then you had blackboards and radiators instead of—the kind of heat we had was radiators.

**Nykolaiszyn** *And what do you recall of the auditorium?*

**Crawford** Well, I was there when the WPA [Works Progress Administration] built the auditorium on. My uncle, he did work there. I remember that, when they built it on. And it—basketball and cheerleading.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Were you a cheerleader?*

**Crawford** Yes, cheerleading.

**Nykolaiszyn** *What sports did you cheerlead for? Basketball?*

**Crawford** Basketball. That’s all we had was basketball. We had blue pleated skirts, white socks, and white shoes, and a white sweater.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Do you remember any of your cheers?*

**Crawford** No. Ah, no. (Laughter) Maybe something like “Go team, go!” Eighty-three years old, not going to remember that.

**Nykolaiszyn** *(Laughs) I thought I’d ask, I thought I’d ask. What do you recall of the library?*

**Crawford** At our school we had a library in Ms. Armstead’s room that you could go in there and check out books. I’ve always been a reader. I remember when I was a kid and we had a cousin of mine that was staying with us. Soon as we’d eat supper, we had outside toilets, well I’d take me a book and go to keep from washing dishes. I’d take me a book and go read. (Laughs) We had a fight out there one evening. She said, “You do this every day to keep from washing dishes!”

**Nykolaiszyn** *Got to get your reading in. Are there any memories from your time in class that just come to mind when you recall your school days?*

**Crawford** Just all good times.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Okay. Outside of cheerleading did you participate in any clubs or activities?*

**Crawford** We had Girl Scouts and different stuff like that.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Would you take part in any competitions?*

**Crawford** We’d get out and race on the school ground, play ball, softball.

**Nykolaiszyn** *So you mentioned you were a cheerleader, who were some of your bigger rivals?*

**Crawford** You mean classmates?

**Nykolaiszyn** *No, in terms of different cities. In terms of playing basketball, who were your rivals? Different cities?*

**Crawford** Oh, all over. We beat everybody. We’d go to Pawhuska, and Tulsa, and Claremore, and Bartlesville. We had a good team.

**Nykolaiszyn** *And would a lot of people come watch basketball from the community?*

**Crawford** Oh, really, yes.

**Nykolaiszyn** *What about dances?*

**Crawford** What?

**Nykolaiszyn** *Dances.*

**Crawford** Oh, after every ballgame. We had the Ryan’s Hotel, which is now still standing there and falling over. We’d go upstairs and dance up there after the ballgames. Pay a quarter and go upstairs. They had a great big hall. That building was supposed to have been a hospital and they didn’t give blacks licenses for a hospital. So he [Dr. Louis Ryan] turned it into a rooming house and put his doctor’s office downstairs and then we’d go upstairs. Then all the teachers that came to town stayed there. Go up there and dance until twelve o’clock. Twelve o’clock and go home.

**Nykolaiszyn** *What kind of music?*

**Crawford** All kinds, jitterbug, all kinds.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Would you go with a date or would you just dance?*

**Crawford** No. Everybody just leaves the ballgame and goes up.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Would you date?*

**Crawford** Yes and no.

**Nykolaiszyn** *So when you would, yes and no, hang out with a boy, what would you do?*

**Crawford** Go to the movie.

**Nykolaiszyn** *And where was the movie?*

**Crawford** On Main Street. Upstairs, couldn’t go downstairs.

**Nykolaiszyn** *So how did Attucks School compare to the schools attended by white students?*

**Crawford** Well, they had things to play with and some of them had buses to take them to school. One time I remember us having a sandbox at that school down there and a merry-go-round that they took from the white school and brought down. That’s all I ever—I don’t remember no swings or nothing. The school is still there. I live across the street from it now.

**Nykolaiszyn** *And how was the school regarded in the black community? Attucks School?*

**Crawford** Wonderful. The blacks really participated with it, you know, the families. Seeing that the kids got there and on time. Can’t be late.

**Nykolaiszyn** *So you graduated in 1949. Tell me about graduation.*

**Crawford** Well, to tell the truth about it, I missed one month graduating. Quit school.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Can you share why you quit school?*

**Crawford** Just didn’t want to go to school. It wasn’t—would’ve quit long time ago, but my mom made me go.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Did you just go work?*

**Crawford** I already was working.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Oh, okay.*

**Crawford** I was working, yes.

**Nykolaiszyn** *So you just worked more.*

**Crawford** Fifteen dollars a week. Yeah, I worked more.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Okay. So around ’49 you left school,* Brown vs Board of Education*, 1954, happened. How did the community feel that Attucks School was going to be closing, students would have to go to Vinita…*

**Crawford** I had moved and I was grown and gone then.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Okay.*

**Crawford** That was in the ’50s. I left Vinita in the early ’50s.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Okay. Did you still have kin in the area?*

**Crawford** Yes.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Okay.*

**Crawford** I left and went to Tulsa*.*

**Nykolaiszyn** *What impact do you think the school’s closing had on the community?*

**Crawford** Well, I really don’t know because I wasn’t here, and I didn’t come back here. (Laughs) But I think they enjoyed going to the other school.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Okay, and during your time here can you tell me about some of the black businesses that were big when you lived here?*

**Crawford** Yeah, across from the ballpark there was the Beer Tavern and then there was a restaurant by the Venters, George Venters had a restaurant. When I was a kid, Billy Terrell had a chili parlor down on Main Street. Used to be a lot of stuff on Main Street. We had a black garage and a black hotel, two-story hotel, Georgie Rider, grocery store. There was lots of black businesses.

**Nykolaiszyn** *And you mentioned about the doctor. Did you have access to a hospital or was it segregated?*

**Crawford** Nothing but the county hospital out there, yeah. Mostly when people got sick, you didn’t go to no doctor. They just give you some homemade stuff, you know. But we did have a doctor named Dr. Sharpe that was in that building where Ryan’s was and when Dr. Ryan died he took over the practice.

**Nykolaiszyn** *And did your parents and your grandmother remain in Vinita?*

**Crawford** My mother died before I left Vinita. My grandmother remained in Vinita until she passed away.

**Nykolaiszyn** *And where are they buried in town?*

**Crawford** Out at the Fairview Cemetery.

**Nykolaiszyn** *So Attucks School is on the* National Register of Historic Places*. Were you involved in that process?*

**Crawford** Yes.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Can you tell me a little bit about how that idea happened, to get the school on the register?*

**Crawford** Well, I started it. When I came back to live here I tried to get certain people to—“Let’s get it on the historical site.” Nobody wanted to be bothered. Even my cousin Charles said, “We don’t want that old Attucks School because it’s got mold in it and blah, blah, blah.” Negative people. Then I went to Glenda Downing and she and I got it started.

**Nykolaiszyn** *And you got it on there.*

**Crawford** Got it on there. You’ll see where on some of those papers where she wrote on it, “We did it.”

**Nykolaiszyn** *How did that feel to get that done?*

**Crawford** Oh, wonderful! Wonderful. Then we did a monument there and we got bricks around the monument, sold bricks. I think I sold 150 because I called everybody that had went to school at Attucks, that I could think of, and they bought bricks. The rest of them, they sold about fifty, I guess, altogether. Anyway, all the people that had went to school there way older than I am. There’s three people still living that’s ninety-seven: Marylin Ryan, E.D. Irons, and Dorothy Stubbs, that’s the principal’s daughter.

**Nykolaiszyn** *And they’re still living?*

**Crawford** Still living. Ninety-seven the Ryan girl is, yeah. They’re all in their nineties. Originally it’s about, only about twelve or fourteen, original people still living, that started school there.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Are there any people that you keep in touch with that you went to school there closely?*

**Crawford** Yeah, in my class it’s only one person left. She and I, Verna Dean Hicks, she lives in Wichita and we keep in close touch with each other. We started the school together. All the rest are dead.

**Nykolaiszyn** *I understand there’s a reunion every two years of alumni?*

**Crawford** Every two years, yeah.

**Nykolaiszyn** *What can you tell me about the reunion?*

**Crawford** Well, beautiful. We always have such good reunions and I enjoyed it until we incorporated with the younger group. They don’t believe in doing like they’re supposed to and also Glenda Downing and I got the school incorporated and did bylaws. I was the president for four years and we got bylaws and all that. They don’t want bylaws. They don’t—oh it’s just awful. So I don’t do much attending to it anymore. I’m still on the board, but and the lawyer—they quit on the board because they wouldn’t do it right. Just chaos. Total chaos.

**Nykolaiszyn** *What’s happening at Attucks School today?*

**Crawford** Nothing. In the back we’re supposed to be doing a museum. They have not tried to do nothing and somewhere I got that paper where we went to do the museum. Don’t know what I done with it. Oh, I think this is it. That’s when we, Glenda and I went…

**Nykolaiszyn** *Tried to get a museum going.*

**Crawford** Yeah, and they gave us rights. The school board gave us rights to have the museum, but they have not done one thing. So anyway, I said everybody wants me to run for president again, but I don’t think I will. Also I helped get a scholarship fund started. So we did quite a bit of things in that four years.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Well, Attucks School seems that it was very special to you.*

**Crawford** Oh, very special.

**Nykolaiszyn** *What is one thing you want people to remember about Attucks School?*

**Crawford** All the teachers especially. We had very good teachers and janitors that kept the school clean. I just love it.

**Nykolaiszyn** *And what do you want people to remember about you Mary?*

**Crawford** Just my name is all. It don’t matter. (Laughter) That’s about all. They don’t have to remember me. That’s all.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Do you have kids?*

**Crawford** Stepchildren, yes. I hear from them every day, either on the computer or by the phone.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Well good. And how are you staying busy in retirement outside of your work with Attucks?*

**Crawford** Somebody will call, “Come take me here, come take me there, and I need to go to the store!” This one lady I take shopping and I have to do half of her shopping. Go round and pick up her groceries. I get in a cart and ride and pick up her groceries, most of them.

**Nykolaiszyn** *So you stay pretty busy.*

**Crawford** I stay busy. Somebody always wants—oh, busy all the time.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Well is there anything else you’d like to add about Attucks School or Vinita in general?*

**Crawford** Well, Vinita sucks.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Okay.*

**Crawford** (Laughs) It really does. I was there when they built the gym on so...WPA did that.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Did you watch it being built?*

**Crawford** Yes.

**Nykolaiszyn** *What was special about that time?*

**Crawford** Because my uncle was working out there and I was little and I’d go out and holler at him. Then when they put the stage up there I thought, “Oh boy, we’re going to have lots of places to do plays,” which we did, and stuff.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Did you participate in a play?*

**Crawford** Oh yeah. We had a little, one of our music teachers, had a little band. We had a little band.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Good memories.*

**Crawford** Yeah, good memories.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Favorite teacher?*

**Crawford** Favorite teacher? Well, I would say Ms. Armstead.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Why so?*

**Crawford** Lucille Armstead, because she seen—and she was nice. She seen that you got your lessons. Of course all the teachers did. Very good educators, they was.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Well thank you so much for sharing your memories of Attucks School today. We really appreciate it.*

**Crawford** Well thank you, you’re welcome.

**------- *End of interview*** *-------*