**Oral History Interview**

**with**

**Okla Hicks**

Interview Conducted by

Juliana Nykolaiszyn

August 9, 2014

Spotlighting Oklahoma

Oral History Project

**Oklahoma Oral History Research Program**

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**Interview History**

Interviewer: Juliana Nykolaiszyn

Transcriber: Madison Warlick

Editor: Tanya Finchum

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 Okla Hicks is unrestricted. The interview agreement was signed on August 9, 2014.

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**About Okla Phillips Hicks…**

Okla Phillips Hicks was born in 1935 in Murphy, Oklahoma. She was named after her paternal grandmother, Oklahoma Phillips. The family moved to Vinita, Oklahoma in 1945 and Okla enrolled in Attucks School. She went on to graduate from Attucks School in 1953. In June of the following year Okla married Mr. Hicks and they moved to Wichita, Kansas. After a few years in Kansas, they returned to Oklahoma and her husband to a job in Tulsa. Okla had five children and once they were older, she took a domestic job. After a few years of working in private homes she took a job with Oklahoma’s weatherization department in Tulsa.

Following a divorce, Okla returned to Vinita where she has resided since 1980. She worked at Eastern State Hospital for a number of years and then went into private nursing until she retired. Once back in Vinita, Okla helped to establish a regular reunion for Attucks School alumni.

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 continue to hold reunions every two years.

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| **Okla Hicks**  Oral History Interview  Interviewed by Juliana Nykolaiszyn  August 9, 2014  Vinita, Oklahoma |  |

**Nykolaiszyn** *My name is Juliana Nykolaiszyn with the Oklahoma State University library. Today’s August 9, 2014 and we’re in Vinita, Oklahoma to interview Attucks School alumni. With us is Okla Hicks. Thank you for joining us today, Okla.*

**Hicks** You’re welcome.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Well Okla let’s learn a little bit more about you. Could you tell me the year you were born and where you were born?*

**Hicks** I was born in 1935 in Murphy, Oklahoma.

**Nykolaiszyn** *And tell me a little bit about your parents.*

**Hicks** Well my parents, my dad, he was always—he worked at the power plant back in the early…. He was mostly a farmer with his dad, which was my grandfather, in Murphy. My mother, all she did was just stayed home and maintained the home and took care of us children, you know. She never worked out any while we lived in Murphy, before we moved here in ’45—in Vinita. So anyhow, in ’45 we moved from there to Vinita because my oldest sister she missed one [year] of high school because our school in Murphy was just a little one-room country school. All eight grades went there so when she finished eighth grade she was out of school a year until we moved here in Vinita. She started her ninth grade at Attucks High School. Then we followed behind her, you know. My oldest brother that was under her, he didn’t finish school because he didn’t like Mr. Ryan. (Laughs) Mr. Ryan was going to force him to take the initiation and play his basketball, so Wendy, we called him, he just dropped out of school. So years later he went in the service; this was back in the early ’50s.

Then let’s see, my oldest sister, she graduated from Attucks. Carlene, the next third oldest, she graduated. I had a sister older than I, I caught up with her. She wouldn’t study. I did domestic work in different families’ homes here in Vinita, and she would take and copy all of my lessons I’d get during the recesses and breaks between classes. So I caught on to her. She would copy word for word and the teacher would get after her and she said, “Now I know you two are sisters, but you don’t have the same brainwave, you know.” So I started taking my schoolwork to my jobs, and I worked for white ladies all out in the west part of town, you know, and whatever. So anyhow, she failed one year in school so that made her catch up with me in high school, in the tenth grade I believe it was. So then the guy she was going with got her pregnant, but she stayed in and finished the tenth grade, and she never did come back. Mr. Blye, the principal, tried to get her, after the baby was born, to come back and finish the other two years, but she didn’t you know.

So that’s about my high school, and then I went on and graduated in 1953 with my class. Then I got married to this guy that I had gone with. He was a little older than I was, but I fell in love. I guess that love bug got me or something. So after I graduated in May of ’53 we got married in June, June the 28, a year after I graduated and moved to Wichita, Kansas. Two months later we started our family. So we had two boys and three girls. We stayed there and then we moved back in ’50-something from Wichita and this is where I’ve been since. Well, then we moved from here to Tulsa because he got on at McDonnell Douglas over there. I was working and I told him, I said, “You just stay in Tulsa on your job and the kids and I will make it, you know.” So no, nothing would do him but to move us to Tulsa, which I really didn’t care about it.

So I went over there. I knew this friend, longtime friend, of ours. She worked for this couple that was real rich, and I was there two weeks and she came by the house wanting to know if I was interested in getting a job, you know. I’d just been in Tulsa two weeks. So I said, “Yeah.” I’ve always worked after my children got up big, you know, big enough that I could hire a babysitter. So I took that job and they were rich as I don’t know what—had a lot of money. I went out for an interview and the lady, Mrs.—oh dear, whatever her name was, I forget. Anyhow, she hired me. She had another black lady there that did the laundry and everything and cleaned the house. All I was to do was to cook their meals, you know. They was the Bryces, Mary and John Bryce. That came to me. They was socialites, they’d have these big parties with all their friends and I’d have to stay in the evening to help the caterers and stuff, serve the food. She had bartenders and everything, so I’d go around with my little white apron and serve the hors d’oeuvres in the big rec room that they had and everything. I stayed with them from ’77 until way up in the ’80s I guess.

So anyhow, during the time she got real sick. Her husband took all of them to Hawaii when he knew that she didn’t have long to live. Then when they got back she got real sick, and I wasn’t working for them then. I was doing some other kind of work. I think I started at—it had to do with something with the state. I was the, what do you call it, weatherization. Yeah, weatherization department, I applied. I had moved back here to Vinita and stayed with my mother and dad. Then I went home for Christmas or something to spend with my kids that were still in Tulsa. So I was offered this secretary job. Thank God I knew how to type, bookkeep and everything. The guy that was over the weatherization sent Bobby, my oldest son, to the department and got me an application and I filled it out. Then I came back to Vinita and got my clothes that I’d left, you know, and went back. Went back to Tulsa and got hired, so I worked there—oh, I guess just short of a year I think. Then I had to go in the hospital and I had kidney stones! So I had to go in the hospital a little before I almost had my whole year in at the weatherization. So when I got back I was able to go back and then also I was working in janitorial service at the big Williams Company. Good friend of mine (we became real good friends and still good friends), she got me hired at Williams Company in the janitorial service. So anyhow, that’s about the size of that.

Then here comes the divorce. My husband had just got tired of being married and he wanted his free life again. So I told him, “Go at it,” you know. We had just moved. Had a couple that belonged to our church had built us a brand new brick home, three-bedroom and real nice and everything. So he stayed there until—I got sick or something and was off of work. My doctor told me that I was to be just practically by myself to get through what I was going through with. I forget now what my ailment was. Oh, I came down with bronchopneumonia and almost died until my two younger daughters put me in a car and took me to a doctor just a block over from where we stayed. He told me, he said, “I don’t want you to lift a finger.” He said, “You’re just almost at the point of death.” This was all due because I’d stay up late at night and trying to get the new home in order and then get the kids all ready for school the next day. So anyhow, I made my husband sleep on the divan because I didn’t want to be bothered. So he didn’t like that. Months went by, I got on my feet, and my doctor dismissed me to go back to work for this Mr. and Mrs. Bryce.

So he decided he’d just about had enough, so he went and filed divorce on me. I got the papers. (Laughs) He took off of work. I remember I had a green and white Oldsmobile car. I had the hood up and was checking my oil before I drove out the drive to go to work for the Bryces. So this black guy pulled up across the street. As he was coming across the road to where I was in the driveway, he reached in his pocket and pulled out this long piece of white envelope-looking thing. He had gone and got him a white attorney and filed divorce on me. These was the papers he was having served on me, you know. We hadn’t talked divorce or nothing. The black guy from downtown that served the divorce papers on me, he said, “Oh,” he said—he just made the comment he said, “You don’t need no man around the house.” I didn’t catch on to what he was saying. He said, “Are you Mrs. Okla Hicks?” I said, “Yes I am, last time I checked.” I said, “I don’t mean to be sarcastic or anything, but I am.” So he said, “Well I have some divorce papers to serve on you.” I says, “Some divorce what?” He said, “Divorce papers.”

My husband, at that time, he was in our bedroom looking out of the red drapes that I had up to our bedroom and watched the man hand me these divorce papers. I thanked the guy for the paper, and I knew what it was, and he said, “Well Mrs. Hicks, you have a good day.” I said, “I’ll try.” (Laughs) So he went on and got in his car, so I opened my car door and put this white piece of paper in my pocketbook and backed out. So I got off of work that evening and he didn’t say nothing to me. Me and my big mouth I said, “Oh,” I said, “You tired of me and your family huh? What brought this on?” He didn’t give me no answer or something. I told him, I said, “Well, I’ll fix you.”

So I called an attorney and I said, “I’m not going to let him get away with it.” I called my friend that we all went to church, same church, Cella Campbell. She and her husband had got a divorce, but six months later they remarried. I called her on the job. She worked out at Utica Square. So I say, “Cella, I know you’ve been through a divorce. ” I said, “I’m getting ready to go through one,” and she almost came through the phone. She said, “What’s going on?” I said, “Girl you’re not going to believe what I’m getting ready to tell you.” I said, “I was served divorce papers yesterday,” and she—“Everybody at church thought you all was just the ideal couple with them pretty children.” I said, “Girl, you just don’t know what goes on in other peoples’ homes.” Yeah, he was an usher, ushering every Sunday in church. I was singing in the choir and the kids was involved with the youth there at the church. And everything I thought was…you know. But he had been planning this and everything.

So what really did it—one day I was—had got in my car, backing out of the garage to go to work. As I was going to work, this lady pulled up in my driveway. He had taken off of work, and something told me to keep on driving and go on to work, because I heard word that she had killed her husband. I said, “Nah, I’m not going to tangle with this sister.” I said, “Whatever she want in my house, my husband, she can have it,” you know. So I just kept on driving and went on to work. Came in that evening, he was there trying to cook some supper for the kids and still didn’t—it was days before I said anything to him. Finally I got the nerve. I said, “Oh, so you want out of your family?” Next thing I knew he had served a—well, this was in a different place, but he was the one that filed for it and went and got him a white attorney and filed divorce on me. So that’s the end of that story. After twenty-some years of marriage and five kids. So I said, “Well, I’m going to give you what you want.”

Then he called to say he was coming back. He wasn’t supposed to come on the property or anything, and I had to call my attorney several times to get a restraining order on him. But he did come back, and I had a big eight by ten picture of me that I had when we lived here in Vinita. He came over while I was at work and took this picture of me, so I called my attorney. I told him, “I’ve got some things missing from my house. He’s not supposed to come to the house unless I’m there.” My attorney contacted him and told him, “I’ll give you twenty-four hours to get her picture back where you got it from.” So he brought it back. I thought maybe the glass would be broken and everything. So that was in that. So then he started going with other women, and we hadn’t even got really divorced. I just made him pack his little stuff and leave.

Then one night, it was about a year, I had this real good friend, and we’re still good friends, who stayed there in Tulsa. She said, “Okla, you need to get out of this house and enjoy yourself.” So there for a year I wouldn’t go nowhere but to work and to church and Sunday school with my kids, you know. So we went to this club, drove up, backed my car in. I remember I had a green and white Cutlass Supreme Oldsmobile, and backed in. Just so happened the owner of the club was standing in the door. When he, my husband, almost husband, almost to be a divorced husband, he pulled up in front of my car and blocked me in and came around to my side. I had the windows rolled up, just cracked a little bit. The first thing that popped in my mind was that he had a gun. So the owner of the club was standing in the door and ordered him to get off of his property. So he still was trying to figure out some way to get to me through my rolled up window. So the owner of the club told him, says, “I’m going to tell you one more time or else I’m going to leave you laying right where you standing,” because most of those club owners and stuff carries a gun for protection and safety. So he got in his car and left. I told Dorothy, I said, “Well we’re not going in the club because he’ll probably come back.” She said, “I don’t know the owner.” I said, “I know him. He’s not going to let him in this club after he done ordered him off his property.”

The club was on Virgin. We went way out north part of town to a friend of my friend and her friend to use the telephone. So we got out and I went in and asked if I could use a phone, so I called the police. I figured he had gone back over to the house, which when the police came he asked me where I was. I said, “I’m out here with a friend of mine off of Thirty-sixth Street North.” He said, “How long will it take you to get to your home?” I said, “Oh, about five minutes.” So when me and my friend drove up there, there was three police cars with two policemen. He done run off in the ditch on the side of our house. So the police ordered him to get that car out of that ditch and leave and he said he didn’t want to get another call from me that he’s back over there harassing me or bothering me anywhere I was. I didn’t be bothered with him for a long time, but he would come while I was at work to see the kids, which is fine. I said, “He just better not harm any of them.” So that’s the end of that.

So finally I went and cross-filed, got me a white attorney, and cross-filed divorce on him and got the children, got the new home, and naturally I had my new car and everything. So he just went on about his merry way and he was out there partying and good timing with the younger generation and everything. I told him, “This is what you wanted, so this is what you going to get.” So that was that. So anyhow, me and the kids, one by one as they got grown, they left home. Just left me and the two young girls, my two youngest daughters, but we made it. We made it. Then finally I got in sort of a financial bind and I’d let the house go back. Then I moved back here to Vinita and stayed here with my mother and dad.

**Nykolaiszyn** *What year did you move back?*

**Hicks** It was in ’70…I think it was ’80. I stayed with them in this house. Started off—where did I start? I think I went to Eastern State and then I had another job. I went to Eastern State and got hired out there and worked quite a while. Then I worked for private—well, I went off into nursing, that’s what it was. Private-duty nursing.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Well, let me take you way back. So you were about ten when you moved to Vinita.*

**Hicks** I was one month short. We moved, I think, in August—September…I was two—I was about two months short of being ten years old.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Tell me about the house you moved to.*

**Hicks** Oh, you don’t want to know. The only thing available, it was on the same street that my mother’s sister Nelly, Aunt Nelly, lived on—on Third Street. She lived in a corner house and we there was—we would come up to visit her and we saw this old tin, it was tin, old rusty tin. It was one, two, two rooms, which should’ve been a living room that was a bedroom. They had another bedroom then it went out on the porch and we had a little kitchen. There was—let’s see, Mother had had how many children of us? When we moved to Vinita I think Pat, the baby girl of all eleven—it was eleven of us, eight girls and three boys.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Wow.*

**Hicks** And we all stayed in this little tin house. That year, Pat was born during that time when we moved to Vinita.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Would you share a room?*

**Hicks** I’ll tell you. Mother and Dad had their bed, and Pat, the baby, came along. She slept with them. Mother had a let out divan in the front room. That’s where the three brothers—I mean, the two brothers slept. Wendy and Charles, the two oldest brothers, they’d let this divan out. They slept on it. There was two beds, three beds, back in the—just like I said, it was just a three-room with all of us. Mother had three beds back there and the girls, it was eight of us girls, she would take and separate some of us. Some would sleep at the head and some would sleep—oh, it was a hard time. We had a good life in Murphy before we moved. We had everything: food, big homes, and everything. Plenty cows, plenty vegetables, because my grandfather he was a farmer.

We stayed there in that little crowded house, but we made it and Mother had no electricity, had to burn coal oil lamps. So finally, Mr. George Thomas stayed in a white house next to this old tin house that we moved in when we came from Murphy. He moved back to Sallisaw or somewhere and that house was available. So Mother and Dad got in touch with whoever he was buying it from or renting from, and we moved in it. It was only—it was a really nice living room, two bedroom, and a kitchen, and we didn’t have any running water inside. So we managed. By that time I think the oldest sister, Yvonne, had gotten married. Then Carlene, the second oldest sister, Wendell, the oldest brother, he had gone into the service. So that was lessening the crows you know. (Laughs) So anyhow, that left—Wendy went in the service. Carlene, when she graduated, she went to California and stayed a while with my mother’s sister, Aunt Hazel. So that was one, two, three, so that left from Martha, me, the oldest, on down to the littlest, Patricia, who was the baby girl of the eleven. It was eight girls and three boys…

**Nykolaiszyn** *Still a lot in the house.*

**Hicks** Still a lot in the house. This was the white house, but it had an outside hydrant. You know, no running water. Mother had, for the cook stove, she had put coal oil or something in it, which was dangerous. I think one time it exploded on her and just so happened she didn’t get burned. By that time I was working out in white peoples’ homes and going babysitting and taking care of their grandchildren or their children, something, while they worked. So I started when I was in the seventh grade, working out.

**Nykolaiszyn** *I don’t think you’ve said it on tape yet, but what was your father doing during that time?*

**Hicks** My dad was a bartender at the club east of Vinita, out on Sixty-six. He was a bartender for Clasby—had a big club. Then soon after that Mr. Clasby made a big dance thing outside where he would have live bands to come up. Ernie Fields, I know you’ve probably heard of Ernie Fields Senior, had a big band back in those days. He’d come up there and we’d get—my oldest sisters’ boyfriends, we’d jump in their cars and we’d go out there and park and get up on top of the car so we could see over this thing that Mr. Clasby...where the bands would play out on the side of the club. We’d just be out there just dancing and having a good time. Anyhow, that was the story of my dad. Then on Sundays Dad would always take Martha, my sister that I’m under, she lives in Midwest City now, so take us out there to help clean up the club after they done had their big Saturday night. We’d go out there and he’d bring us back to town for us to get ready to go to Sunday school and church. It was some kind of life.

**Nykolaiszyn** *How would you get to Attucks School?*

**Hicks** We walked because we just stayed—Attucks is on Fourth Street, and we always stayed on Third Street, just a block over.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Oh, so that was close.*

**Hicks** We walked, snow, in the winter, snow up to here. It was real close, and we was really lucky to get that close because a lot of the other children lived way out in the north part that they had to walk. Back in those days the children in school, not like they are now with their cars and stuff, but none of the high school had any cars. They had to walk all the way from north end to Attucks. We were just so lucky to have a block, see? You know, just school was just right over on Fourth Street.

**Nykolaiszyn** *So describe the school for me. What was it like?*

**Hicks** It was nice and then just in recent years they’ve renovated it. They’ve done the whole—they’ve put a new ceiling in the gymnasium and did the floor over. We had our last school reunion about, in another year I think we’ll have a—we started out every four years. Then we started…a lot of Attucks alumni was passing on, passing away. So we decided to have it every two years. So let’s see, it’s another year next summer. In 2015 we’ll have our next one, which will be two years. We had nice teachers. I liked all of my teachers.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Well tell me about some of the teachers you remember.*

**Hicks** I remember all of them. Mr. S.A. Blye was the principal. Mr. Louis Ryan, he was the basketball coach and he taught senior level. I went to him my junior year and I didn’t like him, so I didn’t go back my senior year of graduation.

So we had Mr. Ryan, he was the coach. He was the science and history teacher. Mr. Blye was the homeroom, he was downstairs, but we had study periods and then we had algebra and geometry under him. That’s all he taught. We had Ms. Armstead. She was our English literature teacher. We had a home economics where we learned how to cook and sew. Let’s see, we had a music teacher, we had several of them that would come and go, you know. Let’s see, who else? Let me see…that was about all of the teachers there at one time. They would just—like when school would start in September we’d probably didn’t have the same teacher or teachers that we had the year before. Let’s see, we had Ms. Ford out of Wagoner, that’s when we had typing, bookkeeping, and shorthand. The students, we wasn’t catching on to shorthand so they stopped the shorthand in her class, but she was a good teacher. I think you would call it commercial or something. Anyhow, I took typing and bookkeeping under her.

Then my senior year I didn’t want to go back in to Mr. Ryan [inaudible], so I took a second year of typing. Then we had a, I’m glad you asked, we had a Girl’s Glee Club. I’m glad you asked that. We, the girls, all of them, the music teacher—she would choose the best ones that could sing. I was one of the group and I guess it must have been about eight or ten of us that she chose out of the music department. Do you know we would walk from Attucks, this is the Girl’s Glee Club, to way different parts to the white ladies that was having their teas or something. We would walk from Attucks School all out in the west end, wherever we would be invited. We would just be practicing our songs as we were singing and people would be coming out and looking out their doors and hear all this singing. We’d be practicing our songs between the schools and the ladies who wherever we was going to sing. That was real fun, it was fun. Sometimes we’d get caught off—we’d be caught by the train, you know, the track, and we’d just be singing our little hearts out uptown, going to sing for these ladies’ teas and stuff like that. So that was really something.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Well you were in Glee Club, were you in any other clubs or activities?*

**Hicks** No, we had a basketball—the girls, high school girls, played the alumni—the old ladies that had families. I remember the Ryans. They got together, the alumnus would play us and we’d just beat the socks off of them. Some of them had just had babies and they’d be out there with no bras on, and they’d be just a flopping, you know. We’d beat their socks off and they’d get so mad because we’d beat them so bad. That was just for, you know, just to do something, the high school girls. Let’s see, who was it? Eva Thomas and my sister Martha and I, we was about the three best basketball players on the high school girls team.

Mr. Ryan, the one I’m talking about, and Dwain Willis, and James Lloyd Bullock, they was referees. They would get to cheating for the alumni ladies. They would cheat and boy I tell you I had one little girl, Eva Thomas. Her sister Marva, we graduated together in ’53, but she’s in a resident senior citizen home, her sister Eva. She didn’t take no stuff. She would fight them old women out there, and they’d get into it and the referees would have to come in-between them and everything. We just looked forward to beating them old alumni women’s socks off. They’d just be out there just panting and blowing and everything.

We didn’t play basketball with any of the districts that was in our district, you know. Some of the high school out of town, they had girl basketball, so we formed our own—played them old women in Vinita. So it was a lot of fun, we just looked forward to beating them and they’d just get so mad. As I said, the coaches was Dwain Willis was coach of Jerri and Lela Bee. Let’s see, Dwain, Dwain…Dwain was married to Lela Bee. Dwain Willis was married to Jerri Willis and they would just cheat and everything. We’d just be fussing and almost coming to blows and everything, so that was a good experience.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Would you have proms or dances?*

**Hicks** Oh yes! We’d have a junior and senior prom and live bands. You couldn’t attend unless you was a junior or a senior. The lower grades, ninth and tenth, they weren’t allowed to come. They could come and stand around the gym and listen to the band and watch us dance, but they weren’t allowed to until they became juniors and seniors. Yeah, we had proms. We’d decorate, get the big ladders, and the boys would get up there and decorate with crepe paper and everything, and the stage where the band would be playing. Then we would be invited to different schools in our districts. You know, to their proms and their basketball tournaments. So it was fun—fun, fun, fun, enjoyed it.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Do you remember any other school employees outside of teachers and the principal? Like the janitor or…*

**Hicks** Oh yeah, there was Mr. “Ike” Isaac Bean. When we moved to Vinita in ’45 he was the janitor. They said—I think that was during the time that he was going blind, but he was a barber. They said he didn’t have no sight, but he would cut hair in his home and everything. Then what else…back up. You asked me—what was the question?

**Nykolaiszyn** *Janitor.*

**Hicks** Janitor? Okay, Mr. Houston Landrum, when we first moved to Vinita he was the janitor. Then on down through the years, Edgar West, my cousin, he was the janitor. Yeah, we always had someone associated with the school as janitors. Edgar, who’s my second cousin, he’s deceased. So is Mr. Houston Landrum and Mr. Ike Bean. Yeah, we always had a janitor.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Well with working so much while you were in school, when did you have time for homework?*

**Hicks** I would get my homework during like—we would always have an hour in school. Instead of going out on the playground or being with the other students I’d stay in and take that hour. Sometimes during my lunch period, we just stayed on the block over from the school and I would get my lessons. I’d go to Mr. Blye’s office, the principal’s office, any spare time I could, because I always worked out in the west part of town after I got out of school.

**Nykolaiszyn** *And what would you do with the money you made?*

**Hicks** Bought my clothes, bought my shoes and clothes and stuff. My sister, this Martha that I’m under, she would slip and get my nice dresses and stuff and she was tomboyish. She’d go wrestling and climb wire fences and stuff, and Mother wouldn’t make her stay out of my clothes when I’d be on my jobs and stuff. Yeah, I worked after school from seventh grade all the way until I graduated in ’53.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Tell me about discipline in school.*

**Hicks** Oh, we had some tough teachers, so I was always on my good side. I never did…everybody said, “You Mr. Blye’s pet.” And “Yah, yah, yah, you just all the teachers’ pet.” I said, “No it’s not, because I respect them for who they are. Whether I’m in seventh grade or twelfth grade, I do exactly what they ask of me to do.” I didn’t have any problem with any of the teachers. Never was called in the office or anything.

**Nykolaiszyn** *What would happen to students who misbehaved?*

**Hicks** Well, Mr. Blye, he had a paddle. He didn’t whip the girls with it, but he had a paddle that had holes in it. Oh, and I’d hate to see him whip them boys. He would grit them teeth and whip them so to they just be screaming and that should’ve been outlawed from the school. I mean it was a big thick paddle with a big handle on it. That was what he called disciplining them, you know, if you thought they did something that they deserved it. Which a lot of times I didn’t think they deserved it. Especially down in Mr. Blye, the principal’s room.

Me and Marva, my best friend, we still keep in touch. She went to school at Elizabeth City, North Carolina when we graduated. Did her four years up there and then she got a teaching job when she moved to Los Angeles. We talk quite often, and she’s retired from teaching, but she had an oldest sister and a few of her brothers had moved in the LA area. That’s why when she finished college in Elizabeth City, North Carolina she went out there and got a teacher’s job. Matter of fact I just talked to her the other day, and we just talked like we were back in high school, you know, but we still friends. Then her sister, Eva, she’s in a senior citizen residential home out there. Out of twelve of the kids she and her sister, Eva, they the only two left out of their family.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Well, looking back on your time at Attucks are there any memories that just really stand out in your mind?*

**Hicks** Gee, there’s a lots. Just like I say, it was fun. It was really fun because I was involved in—like I remember, I don’t know whether you remember Edgar West, but he was the janitor when I was in school. It was one class—I forget now…I think it was his class there was only two boys and two girls in his graduating class. We always had the senior play just before school was out. Ms. Armstead was the sponsor of the high school senior plays. So their class, they needed one more female to fill the cast and they came way back down, I think I was ninth grade, yeah I was ninth grade and they was graduating, and chose me to play the part that they needed—another female. I was a freshman in high school and they chose me out of all the girls in the ninth, tenth, and eleventh. They chose me to play the part that they needed, one more girl in their play.

Then of course I was in our senior play. I never will forget the name. It was *Peek-A-Boo Penny,* and we would have so much fun. Let’s see, it was nine of us that graduated in my class in ’53 and Ms. Armstead was our sponsor. We would have the best fun down there at night on the stage rehearsing our parts and everything. It was *Peek-A-Boo Penny—*was the name of our senior play. So we’d just crack up. Ms. Armstead would just have to call a break for us to get ourselves together, because it was such a funny play anyhow, and the way some of the senior characters would portray it we’d just fall out laughing. We couldn’t say another word. Those just stick in my mind. We had so much fun at night down there practicing for our senior play.

Then when we graduated the salutatorian and valedictorian…Let’s see there’s my cousin, Lafayette West was my second cousin. He was one, and then Marva Thomas that I’m speaking of, she was the next. So whichever one was the highest, they got that. Then I did the history. The night of our graduation I did the history of our class. I went way back when we was in grade school all up until us graduating.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Where was graduation held at?*

**Hicks** It was at the high school—Attucks.

**Nykolaiszyn** *In the auditorium?*

**Hicks** Yes, on stage. Yeah, that’s where we would march in during graduation. We’d have our cap and gowns on. We’d march in from outside and the gymnasium would be just packed with people, you know, at graduations—all of them. We would all sit out in the floor and then I forget now who was the—Mr.Blye was our principal, but who’s that over all of the schools?

**Nykolaiszyn** *Superintendent?*

**Hicks** Superintendent, yeah. He would always be there to give out our diplomas. Then they’d have all of us, all the seniors, through all the classes of the years sit out in the middle of the gymnasium floor. As our name was called, we would get up and go and the superintendent would hand us our diploma. Then we’d have to take our [tassel] and put it over on this side or this side, I forget now which one. Yeah, we had nice [graduations]. We had to march in by a song that our music teacher was playing and everybody would stand up and they’d be hollering and a screaming and a shouting and a clapping and especially your family members. So it was fun, fun, fun, fun.

**Nykolaiszyn** *How was Attucks School regarded in the community? What did people think about it?*

**Hicks** Oh it was nice. When we would put on fundraisers or something to take trips like to music festivals, which invitations or the whatever, they would cooperate, because we’d put on a lot of fundraisers in order to take us by bus somewhere. I never will forget. We charted a bus. Ms. Ella Mae Harriss out of Tulsa was our music teacher. We went to Langston, Oklahoma for the national music festival and we chartered this bus. All up until the day that we was to pull out from the school in this busload of kids going to Langston for the music festival, we put on fundraisers to raise money. Then they would have a style show in-between where they would have all of the choirs from the high schools combine to present the music, the singing, and everything. So this particular year while I was in high school, we only went to Langston to the big music singing fest—choir.

They had a style show and so we had home economics. We made clothes and we started out making little aprons and then we progressed to making dresses and skirts and stuff like that. So I remember I made this dress and it had a little [inaudible] top to coincide with the print and stuff, flowers or whatever. So my home economic teacher, out of all of our home economics (they had a style show, the year we went to Langston for the music festival, for entertainment), she chose me. She put my name in there to be in the style show in Langston. So I modeled and styled this two-piece dress at Langston, walked across stage with all the others that was on style show. I was a little popular girl, I guess you’d say. (Laughter) I was always being chose to do something special.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Well you graduated before integration and you were getting on with your life after you graduated, but when you learned that Attucks School was closing how did it make you feel?*

**Hicks** It was—well, not only me, but it was sort of sad, you know. As I said I was fifth grade when we started, when I started the school. Just to think that the integration, well it wasn’t anything we could do about it. It was to come sooner or later. Well I had sisters, younger sisters, that was in the integration that went to the Vinita High School. I said, “Oh I hope I hurry up and get out before—all I hear about they going to integrate the schools,” and I was just hoping that it wouldn’t be the next year when school started or something. I don’t know, I just had that in the back of my mind. I don’t think I could have adjusted well.

**Nykolaiszyn** *What was the community’s response to the school closing?*

**Hicks** It seemed like—well you know Mr. Ryan, our science teacher, he went to the high school as a teacher. Mr. Blye, our principal, he was there. They closed Attucks for a while, and then when they opened up again they made it like first grade…you remember that?

**Nykolaiszyn** *Yeah.*

**Hicks** First grade to fifth grade...

**Nykolaiszyn** *I think that’s about right, fifth or sixth.*

**Hicks** …had classes. Yeah, and then I think they had some of the same teachers that was here to teach those grades. Well I was gone, I was out of school and gone. I mean I thought it was nice for them to do that, but it didn’t happen while I was there.

**Nykolaiszyn** *How do you think your education at Attucks compared to a white student in Vinita?*

**Hicks** How do I feel…

**Nykolaiszyn** *Do you think you got the same education? Better education?*

**Hicks** You know I had sisters and my brother Charles that moved back here a few years ago after forty years in California. They all went. From Helen, my sister that’s under me, we were the last going to Attucks and then they started integrating which meant the black students went to the white high school.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Right.*

**Hicks** They were in this group of integration, but I didn’t have a—it was okay with me, because when it was happened I guess I was out of school. Do you remember when…

**Nykolaiszyn** *You were out of school…*

**Hicks** Do you remember what year they integrated?

**Nykolaiszyn** *They integrated, I believe, in ’58. Does that sound about right?*

**Hicks** Yeah, I came out in ’53.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Yeah, but I mean even in ’53 you were going to a segregated school. You had the white kids going to Vinita, do you think your education was the same? Do you ever wonder about that or no?*

**Hicks** Well I can say we had some good teachers at Attucks, and if you didn’t get what they was teaching it was nobody’s fault but the student’s. I graduated with a B+ average because I contributed that to me not—because after school I always went to the west part of town. I worked for the white lady taking care of the children, and cleaning the house, and cooking their meals and stuff like that. So that took some time and sometimes it would be dark before I’d leave their house to go home, which I walked to and fro, to and fro, way out in the west part of town. I remember snow and all. My other sisters before me, my older sisters, they did the same thing. We always got us a little job. Mother, she worked out and that’s how we got working in the white ladies’ homes out here in west part of town because Mother said, “Well I got some teenage daughters,” and she did. She worked out too, up until she was way up in age. We did, we just followed. She’d get us work.

I remember I was twelve years old and my dad worked at the Bob Clasby Club out here east of town on the hill. Mother got sick and we found out later she was pregnant with Pat, the last baby girl. So I’d get out of school at four o’clock and the guy that I married, his uncle, [inaudible] Irons, ran a taxi cab and his nephew was running the cab. He’d be there at the house when I’d walk from the school, over on Third Street, and pick me up and take me out east of town at the Hilltop Café and I was just fifth grade. The waitresses out there, they would have me to stack pop boxes—wood boxes that the pop came in, they’d be over there. I’d be up on these boxes because they had these old time—one for washing dishes, and one for draining, and then the drain board. I’d have to stand on these pop boxes, big wooden pop box that pop came in so I could reach over and wash the dishes and then switch over here and rinse them, put them on the drain board. Then I’d just stack the dishes up because the cooks, they had shelves where they had all they steak platters and dishes and stuff. They’d tell me, “Okla, just leave them there because you’re not tall enough to…” I was fifth grade. They would take and stack the dishes up where the stove was and they’d be cooking they steaks on these platters, putting them on these platters and stuff.

**Nykolaiszyn** *You had to work hard in school and out.*

**Hicks** Sure did. I worked to twelve o’clock, from a little after four when I’d get out there. Eight hours every night, and I’d take my work, homework, to school and then between getting caught up washing the dishes and scalding them and everything, I’d go over there and get my homework for the next day. It was tough, but I look back on it and I said, “You know, how in the world at ten years I did that,” but I did because my older sisters they had jobs in town that they would go on. They needed somebody bad to wash dishes, dishes and pots, and I did it at ten years old.

**Nykolaiszyn** *What were some of the black businesses in town that you could remember?*

**Hicks** Oh let’s see, there was George Venters’ restaurant. There was black barbers that I think they didn’t have any license to barber. Mr. Isaac Bean, he was partially blind, he cut hair. Mr. Blue, they had a beer joint across from Attucks Park. Are you familiar with Attucks Park? Okay, it was across—him and his wife owned a beer joint that they had a vender in there. They sold—he barbecued some of the best barbeque in town. That’s where everybody would hold up. Young kids wasn’t allowed in there because it was sort of a rough—you know, there would be fighting. Were still staying over on Third Street and all at once you would hear, especially on Saturday nights, you would hear guns going off. It was rough, and no young kids underage was allowed in the place because it had a bad name. So that was him and his wife, they owned the beer tavern across from the Attucks Park. So anyhow, we didn’t—Daddy used to hang out there. Like in the daytime if we wanted pop or something, we would go over there and buy a pop and go straight back home. That was before the crowd would start gathering in the evening.

They used to have a real good baseball team, the black guys here in Vinita. Some of them was real good, some of them could’ve become professionals if they would have, you know. Then they would play other black teams, they’d play the white baseball teams in the park. The seats and stuff—what you call it? Anyhow, they would just be full and just far as the eye could see was just people, like on the big game. I remember I think a baseball team from Kansas City came and boy that park was just full of people. We looked forward to that because we’d go there and the—what you call them, would be full. So we’d just stand around and get a peek at them hitting the ball and stuff. We had a real good black baseball team that they traveled different places and played. The other teams would come there and everything. So that was a real fun—good entertainment.

**Nykolaiszyn** *What about doctors?*

**Hicks** We had Dr. Sharpe. Well, way back before we moved here they had a Dr. Ryan, black doctor. Ryan’s hotel, I don’t know whether you’ve heard of it, but it’s right up the street and across on the—what you call them, it’s still standing. It was just a family, the Ryan Hotel they called it, and so the old man was a doctor. Dr. Sharpe was a doctor when we moved to Vinita in ’45. Had a good practice and everything, delivered a lot of babies and everything. The Ryan hotel—they wanted to put that on the Historical [Register]. Had you heard about that?

**Nykolaiszyn** *On the Registry?*

**Hicks** One of the great-great-grandsons is living there and he stays in…His mother, Geraldine Willis, years ago, not too many years ago, she was staying in the south part, her bedroom. This particular morning, I heard the sirens and I said, “Now, where is that? It’s getting awful close.” Well she had gotten up that morning and had on a long nylon housecoat. She had one of these little heaters, you know, with the open—what you call it, had the grid…

**Nykolaiszyn** *Flame.*

**Hicks** Yeah, and she got too close to that and set herself on fire.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Oh my goodness.*

**Hicks** By the time Javonya, her baby girl, she was—let’s see…not Javonya. We called her Boo, but she still working at the police department here. She just happened to be home. She didn’t have to go to work that morning for some reason. She saw this smoke and I heard all of these fire trucks and ambulances and stuff, because I stay just right down the street. I couldn’t imagine what was going on and I got up and I said, “Let me go and open my door and see what’s going on.”

The ambulance had already came and got her, but then her daughter Diane, and her daughter, was walking across the vacant lot in front of me going towards the house. So I got my coat on and walked up there, it was real cold, and I got up there and I asked one of the fireman. I said, “What happened?” He said, “Did you know Geraldine Willis?” And I said, “Yes, I know her.” He said, “Well she caught herself on fire and almost burned herself to death.” So anyhow, they rushed her—put her in an ambulance. The ambulance came, I didn’t see that, it had already happened by the time I went and opened my front door to look up the street.

So my brother, Wendy, came by and he said, “What happened.” I said, “I don’t know,” I said, “I went up there and it’s all about Geri. I think the fireman told me she got burnt real bad.” So anyhow, we stood out there and talked a while and a firemen was still up there working, making out they report and everything. So they ended up taking her by ambulance or helicopter or something else—ambulance, to Tulsa, to one of the hospitals there. She was burnt so bad. She lived until that evening and then died.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Wow.*

**Hicks** So that building—that what you call them, is still standing as I say. One of the sons, Geri and Dewain Willis’ son, youngest son, he still, after the fire…The two rooms on the south side of the whole big—used to be Ryan’s Hotel. That’s where he stays, in those two rooms and the other is just…I’m surprised that the city—they said it’s on the, what you call them? Historical thing. But they never did pursue it anymore to put it on the society thing because it was built way back in the 1800’s or something like that—Historical Society.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Well have you attended many of the Attucks’ reunions?*

**Hicks** All of them. Yeah, I was one of the ones that started it back in ’80—I got to get my notes. I’m getting old, sister. I was the one that suggested to Leonard Hardrick and Charles Kirkendoll, two of the sort of prominent black men around here, they came by my house where I’m still staying on, 240 South Second Street. I was out on my porch and they stopped and I walked out to the truck and I said, “Leonard and Charles,” I said, “You know I’ve been thinking.” I said, “Somebody’s just got to start a school reunion.” I said, “It’s just all these years and nobody talked about it,” and so Leonard Hardrick, we graduated in ’53 together, and he still living. There’s quite a few of us, I’m trying to think. Let’s see—I just got to put my thinking cap on. Anyhow, it was nine of us that graduated in ’53 from Attucks.

So anyhow, I brought up about—“Why don’t we get together and have a meeting and try to pull off…get together and as many of us can and start our first high school reunion.” So they both agreed and they said, “Okie,” that’s my nickname. Everybody call me Okie. Said, “You get it started and we’ll back you.” So that’s how it got started. So we called a meeting, Leonard and Charles Kirkendoll and I. Leonard and I especially, because I work with him better than I do with Charles. Charles tried to be too bossy and take rule of everything. So I called, I got with Leonard and set a date. He called up to First National Bank and got the community room and do you know it was over forty or fifty people at our first meeting.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Wow, that’s a lot.*

**Hicks** Yes. So I had made out the order of the procedures of how you go down choosing the president, vice president, secretary, and all of the other, you know. I presented that, I laid that on the table at the meeting up there. “Leonard,” I told him, I said, “Leonard, you can take over. I’ve done my part, I’ve called everybody. I’ve ran up my telephone bill calling all the kids in Tulsa that went to school at Attucks and everybody I could think about.” I just got on the phone. It was over forty-some of us at the first meeting. So we organized it and got it a going. We had some other meetings and we decided what month and what date, and it’s still been going on ever since. So it was every four years, and then in the process a lot of the Attucks graduates was passing away. So we decided that after—one to two every four years, we started every two years. So our next one will be in 2015, and I’ve never missed a one.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Well looking back on your time at Attucks, what’s one thing that you want people to remember about the school?*

**Hicks** Well, it’s still standing (laughs) and a lot of them that comes back every two years for the reunion. We did have our registration down there in Mr. Blye’s room that we call “Prof’s Room.” Then the gymnasium, they have done a lot of work in it, but we just had asked for registration in Mr. Blye’s room which was over on the north. Let’s see, not north—yeah, the east side. What you call them—downstairs. So it’s just about the same, you know. Then when they integrated and changed it into the elementary part, it hasn’t been too many times. Only times when we have a reunion that I get to go through and go upstairs. A lot of the others that come for the reunion, they do the same thing. Just viewing what it looks like now, when they were there years, and years, and years ago.

**Nykolaiszyn** *What do you hope people remember about you?*

**Hicks** About me? I hope it’s all nice. (Laughs) I hope it’s all nice because, just like I say, I’m a kind person that—where I see someone in need, if I’m financially able, I’ll help them. I guess that’d be my legacy.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Well before we close out, tell me about your name?*

**Hicks** My name?

**Nykolaiszyn** *Yes.*

**Hicks** My name? As I said I was named after my father’s mother. Her name was Oklahoma, which apparently she was born way before—now this is what the history that I’ve gotten about my name. She was born way before Oklahoma became a state. I’m going to do some research, go to Tahlequah, that’s where I think she was born, and find out if Oklahoma was named after my grandmother, my dad’s mother—which her name was Oklahoma.

**Nykolaiszyn** *And they shortened it with you…*

**Hicks** Okla. Okla Mae, which they left O-K-L-A M-A-E. So what did they…Okla, H-O—they dropped. [They left] the M, A, and put the E there. Yeah, my dad’s mother’s name was Oklahoma. Then just like I say, I’m going to try to find some research (She was full blood Cherokee Indian), to see if Oklahoma was named after her before Oklahoma became a state.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Well, is there anything else you’d like to add before we let you get out of here today?*

**Hicks** Now you done got everything out of me, honey! How in the world did I remember all of this, sweetheart? (Laughter)

**Nykolaiszyn** *Thank you so much for your time today.*

**Hicks** You’re welcome, I enjoyed it.

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