Oral History Interview with Theodore Adams

Interviewee: Theodore Adams
Interviewer(s): Kenneth Cooper
Interview Date: April 8, 2009
Location: Claflin University, Orangeburg, South Carolina
Interview Length: 46:30
Supplemental Material: Includes transcript, interview release form, data collection form, and subsequent letter.

Abstract

In this interview, Theodore Adams details his experience as one of the initial African American students to integrate Orangeburg High School in 1964. The interview was done in conjunction with the “Somebody Had To Do It” project which is designed as a multi-disciplinary study to identify, locate, interview and acknowledge African American “first children” who desegregated America’s schools. Mr. Adams discusses a wide range of topics as it relates to his first day, student life, personal relationships, and overcoming adversity.
Subject Headings

Adams, Theodore
African Americans students -- South Carolina -- History -- 20th century
African Americans -- Civil rights -- Integration -- South Carolina -- Orangeburg -- History -- 20th century
African Americans -- Education -- South Carolina -- Mellichamp Elementary -- History -- 20th century
African Americans -- Education -- South Carolina -- Orangeburg High School -- History -- 20th century
African Americans -- Social Conditions -- South Carolina -- Orangeburg -- History -- 20th century
African Americans -- South Carolina -- Interviews
African Americans -- Sports -- South Carolina -- Orangeburg -- History -- 20th century
Civil rights movement -- South Carolina -- Orangeburg -- History -- 20th century
National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Orangeburg Branch (Orangeburg, S.C.) -- History
## Transcript

Video 1  
46:30  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Timestamp</th>
<th>Speaker</th>
<th>Content</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0:00</td>
<td>Kenneth Cooper:</td>
<td>Hi, I’m Kenneth Cooper and I’m here at Claflin University. And today on April the 8th, we will be interviewing Theodore Adams who is one of the first to integrate Orangeburg High School in 1965.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kenneth Cooper:</td>
<td>Mr. Adams, how are you doing again?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Theodore Adams:</td>
<td>I’m doing pretty good.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kenneth Cooper:</td>
<td>That’s good to hear. Would you please tell me, exactly, how were you selected to be one of the first to integrate Orangeburg High School.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Theodore Adams:</td>
<td>I really wasn’t selected. The NAACP was looking for volunteers to participate on a court case. There were three of us in my household, children, and the three of us volunteered. That would have been my brother, Rudolf, who’s four (4) years younger than me. And my sister Brenda.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kenneth Cooper:</td>
<td>And your sister Brenda, how younger?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Theodore Adams:</td>
<td>She’s five (5) years younger than I am.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kenneth Cooper:</td>
<td>So, your brother being four (4) years older—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Theodore Adams:</td>
<td>Younger—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kenneth Cooper:</td>
<td>Younger? Ok, younger and then Brenda was five (5) years younger?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Theodore Adams:</td>
<td>Yes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kenneth Cooper:</td>
<td>So you were the oldest and you went to high school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Theodore Adams:</td>
<td>I went to high school and they went to Mellichamp Elementary School.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2:24 Kenneth Cooper: So, you said that you volunteered and your siblings volunteered. Your parents didn’t have any involvement in the process?

Theodore Adams: They had a little, but you have to understand that our volunteering came out of our participating in the movement to desegregate Orangeburg, period. At the time when I was in—up until I was, I guess, 8th/9th grade, all over Orangeburg there were still signs that said “White Only”. There were places that as black people we couldn’t go. Up until the time when I went to Orangeburg High School my freshman year, I didn’t know any white people, period. And so we were always involved in the movement—picketing, whatever we were called, whatever we were asked to do, we did. So when they asked for volunteers, we volunteered because it had to be done.

Kenneth Cooper: So, your parents did not fear losing their jobs or anything?

Theodore Adams: Yes and no. They knew that it was a very real possibility, but they also knew that it had to be done. And had generations prior to us felt that way, then we wouldn’t have had to do it. So, it had to be done and we did it.

Kenneth Cooper: What exactly did your parents do?

Theodore Adams: My father was a butcher by day—he worked at High Grade Packing Company—by night he ran a night club. My mother taught school in Holly Hill School District for 30 years. With the exception of my father’s night time business, both of their jobs were threatened. More than once, but they stuck with it.

Kenneth Cooper: So, I see that you have two younger siblings close to the same age.

Theodore Adams: Well one is deceased now, my brother, but my sister is still alive and she’s still living here in Orangeburg. What was your question to me?

Kenneth Cooper: My question was, since they were around the same age, was there some since of support for each other going into the middle school?
Theodore Adams: For the two of them, yes, because actually I think, there were four black children at Mellichamp. My brother, Rudolf Adams; my sister, Brenda Adams; Thomasina Moss and her brother, what was his name, Anre. Andre Moss. And they were all about the same age. Now at the high school, there were—if my memory serves me correctly—there were only that first year four (4) black males. Tyrone Dash, Tyrone Robinson, myself, and I can’t for the life of me think of the other young man’s name. But there were four (4) males and the rest of them were black females. And I think it might have been maybe ten (10) or fifteen (15) of them. We felt that first year, like, it was our responsibility to protect them. Consequently we got into a lot of fights that normally we would not have gotten into, but we took on the role as protectors and we wouldn’t let anybody touch them.

Kenneth Cooper: Was that something that the adults shared with y’all to do or y’all took that on your own?

Theodore Adams: No, because the court case came out of the NAACP and the NAACP is nonviolent. We had all gone through nonviolent training in the basement of Trinity Methodist Church across the street. And we were told not to, to let the authorities handle it, but they didn’t handle it. So we felt like we had to handle it.

Kenneth Cooper: So once you were disciplined at the school, what was your parent’s reaction since you’ve been taught the nonviolent approach.

Theodore Adams: When we’d come back home they would tell us that we needed to follow the nonviolent role. Then they would pat us on the back for protecting our women.

Kenneth Cooper: Interesting. So if you would, if you can remember, as far back as the first day or the first week exactly, how was that experience for you?

Theodore Adams: Frightening. I couldn’t think of a better word because I was moving into a place that I didn’t have a reference point for. I didn’t know of anybody that I could talk to who had a reference point for what I was about to face. They brought in some—the summer before we went; before our first day of school—they brought in some young people from the northeast, white, and they stayed in our homes with us. And that was to acclimate us, I guess, to what it might be like.
9:45 Theodore Adams: But it really didn’t, if that makes sense. I mean the people—the young white people that stayed with us that summer and I can’t think of the name of the organization that sent them down—but the young white people that stayed with us that summer were of a different mindset from the ones we were going to meet once we got to our first day of school. So if anything it acclimated us to the skin color, but not to the attitudes, not at all. And we had no idea what it was going to be like. I mean there were no books written on the subject that I knew of. So it was frightening. I remember that they picked—this yellow bus—pulled up in front of my house. And there was a state trooper in front and state trooper in the back. I mean highway patrol cars one in the front and one in the back. And it stayed with us all the way to the school, every stop. When we got off the bus, especially at the high school, they escorted us to the principal’s office, and then they left. That first day… I don’t think I’ll ever forget it because I sat on so many tacks that day. Every time I got up out of my seat when I sat back down I sat on a tack. And towards second period I had jumped up so many times that I refused to jump up again and I just endured it. I’d sit on it pull it out throw it on the floor. I just refused to let that get me. Because I remember in homeroom I reported it, I reported it, I reported it, and all I got was snickers and laughs even from the teacher. So there was nothing else to do.

Kenneth Cooper: I understand that you said that you volunteered for this cause, but you didn’t feel like you was leaving your friends that you went to school with and you were going in this new high school what everyone look forwards to in their education career?

Theodore Adams: No, I didn’t think I was going to lose anything. I was going to high school. Yeah, I was going to high school with people I didn’t know, but I was going to high school. But in reality, you’re absolutely right. I lost it all, because there was very little fraternization. There were no dances. I mean the whole time I was at Orangeburg High School I went to two (2) dances and those were Junior/Senior Prom—my junior year and my senior year. They didn’t want us that first year at any of the football games or the basketball games because they didn’t feel like they could protect us. They didn’t want us to play, to participate in athletics, because again they didn’t think they could protect us. So, yeah I lost a lot. I did.
Theodore Adams: And even more than you might imagine, because one would think by doing what we did that maybe we would have been lifted up in our community, but we weren’t. As a matter of fact, we lost friends. Some of the young people that we grew up with didn’t hang out with us anymore. It was like we were caught in the middle of a no-man’s-land, if that make any sense.

Theodore Adams: We were hated by the students we were going to school with and not trusted by a lot of the ones that we would’ve been going to school with at the Black high school.

Kenneth Cooper: Now I was looking through some scrap books at Orangeburg when you was in high school and I see that you were very athletic.

Theodore Adams: Kind of sort of, yes.

Kenneth Cooper: Kind of sort of? So do you feel that once they allowed you to play, because you said the second year?

Theodore Adams: Second, yeah, the second year they let us play basketball, and that wasn’t my sport. Mine was football and track. And it was only the third year they allowed us to do that. I’ll tell you how bad it was. Towards the end of the track season, the two years that I did play/participate, that first year, four of us qualified for the state relays, and… was it four (4)? I qualified in the 100 yard dash, the 220 and the 440 relay. So about four or five of us and one white boy qualified, but he had his own car. So, I don’t know how he got there but he got there. It was held at Columbia, the University of South Carolina on their track field, the coach wouldn’t go with us. So we had to petition the school van, but none of us could drive it. So we had to find a driver to take us to our schools’ relay, the state finals. And that’s one I’ll never forget. Then when we got back, the school wanted our trophies to put in the trophy case. We gave them, but I mean reluctantly, very reluctantly because they didn’t help us get there. So it was bad all around.
Kenneth Cooper: So in the classroom—

Theodore Adams: It wasn’t any better, but I should let you ask your questions. I’m anticipating go ahead, go ahead.

Kenneth Cooper: You’re answering my questions, because you must be feeling the same thing I’m feeling. The environment once you did your first year and you moved into your second year, were the students any more acceptable?

Theodore Adams: There were a few that came around, but the teachers didn’t. The teachers only became to come around towards my senior year. And I think that that’s because that year they started bring black teachers on board. Prior to that, the whole faculty and administration was entirely white. Well that’s not true I think my junior year there was one black teacher and he taught shop, Mr. Thompson. It was my fourth year when they start bringing in more black faculty.

Kenneth Cooper: Was that upon the request of the students, the parents, the community?

Theodore Adams: Parents more so than anything. Yeah, yeah.

Kenneth Cooper: So tell me, how were your grades? You said that the teachers weren’t really, you know, accepting you and your other friends that integrated.

Theodore Adams: Kenneth, I’m not the brightest person in the world, but by no means am I a dummy. I went to Christ the King Catholic School, private institution, my grades there—average student—about a B. But when I got to Orangeburg High and you know what…well let me tell you the story first. At Christ the King, Mrs. Zimmerman, taught us Algebra 1 and we all passed it. The summer before we went, before our first day of school on this new adventure, they brought in this young man by the name of Wally Wilcox I think, a white graduate student from Boston and he taught us Algebra 1 again from the same book. I mean he didn’t really teach it but he reviewed it because most of us were going to have to take Algebra 1. Now had we gone to Wilkinson we would have gone from Christ the King, I mean Algebra 1 automatically Algebra 2 in the 9th grade, but in Orangeburg High we had to take Algebra 1 all over again. Now I’ve had it my 8th grade year, I reviewed it the summer I went in and I got a D my freshman year.
Theodore Adams: and I worked hard to get that D, I’m telling you, and I knew it.

Kenneth Cooper: So the guidance counselor, you couldn’t talk to the guidance counselor—were there guidance counselors for your needs?

Theodore Adams: There were guidance counselors, but they weren’t there to guide us, at least not the first couple of years. I remember English Literature has always been my favorite subject. And I like to think I was a pretty good writer. I don’t care how hard I tried, what I did, any paper I turned in I got D’s or C minuses. And it got to the point, Kenneth, where I would finish my work early, because in my community the community in which I live, there were some English teachers who taught at—some here and some at Wilkinson High School—and I would go to them and have them go over my work. They’d tell me what needed to be corrected, I’d go back home, correct it, get it back to them, beautiful work. I’d get to Orangeburg High turn it in, a D or a C. So that’s just the way it was.

Kenneth Cooper: So with this happening, were there any times your parents had to go to the school and ask what’s going on? Parent teacher conferences?

Theodore Adams: All the time. All the time. And the answer was always the same. We just weren’t good students.

Kenneth Cooper: Well it’s often said that the teachers when they do their observations at the end of the year that the students weren’t sociable. Were there any cases where you felt the other students still wasn’t accepting you even though you were probably a star athlete, they still didn’t value you.

Theodore Adams: The majority of the students at Orangeburg High, yeah I can say the majority, the majority of them did not value us. Did not associate with us, had nothing to do with us. Why? I don’t know what that was but that’s just the way it was.

Kenneth Cooper: Did your younger siblings have any experiences that they shared with you and asked your advice?

Theodore Adams: Their experiences were quite different from mine. I think
Theodore Adams: contained in one classroom with one group of people all day long, where we were moving from class to class. I don’t know. They didn’t have the trouble that we did. Maybe younger children hadn’t had the opportunity to build up the anger that older students had, I don’t know what it was but there experience was quite different from mine.

Kenneth Cooper: If I may go back to a point that you made earlier about the state troopers escorting you to school. Well once y’all got to school, did y’all have any issues with community persons coming to the school or called to threaten the school?

Theodore Adams: That was all the time, but the one that everyone took seriously was a gentleman who broke out of the local jail house, county jail, at that point and time it was called the “Pink Palace”. His purpose for breaking out was to get to Orangeburg High School and kill some of the black students that were there. For a day or so the campus was surrounded with local authorities trying to protect us. And they did, they did a marvelous job, I have to give them credit because they caught that guy in the woods behind the school I think on the second day.

Kenneth Cooper: So after your first year—the first group that first year—that next year did more students come?

Theodore Adams: More black students came, yeah, that second year. And with each passing year more and more black students came. And that made it a lot more tolerable, because now there’s somebody that you can associate with. I mean, we had different lunches and I’d spend my lunch period with one person that first year and that was Tyrone Robinson. He and I had the same lunch period. That was the only person I could talk to, male.

Kenneth Cooper: So none of the white students wanted to build friendships with you?

Theodore Adams: Oh no. Not openly, not that first year. No, unh unh.

Kenneth Cooper: So as your years pass and you finish your senior year and it’s time to decide if I’m going to the work force or college, what preparation did the school give you for that? I know you were saying that your grades were damaged by the teachers not failing you but giving you D’s and C’s. So what college did you thought you could go to with that on your transcript?
Theodore Adams: Claflin and South Carolina State had already said to us that it didn’t matter what our grade point average was, that if we wanted to attend college, at either one of the two, we could. So both Tyrone Robinson and myself came to Claflin.

Kenneth Cooper: Really?

Theodore Adams: Yeah.

Kenneth Cooper: So by then your siblings would have been entering high school?

Theodore Adams: Entering high school and then they were involved in a totally different process because by the time they got to high school they were trying to merge the two systems, Orangeburg High School and Wilkinson. They took a leadership role in putting that all together.

Kenneth Cooper: Wow so they were the first twice.


Kenneth Cooper: That’s powerful. Very powerful. So, was there any time, cause knowing myself if I get frustrated I say, “Maybe I shouldn’t have done this”, is there any time you ever second guessed yourself and said, “It’s not worth it”?

Theodore Adams: Not then. There was a time though that I did. Many many…

Theodore Adams: years later when drugs was running ramped in the streets and there were more black males in jail than in school. It kind of hit me then, why? You know, look at where we are, but now I’m back to “it had to be done” and I’m glad I did it.

Kenneth Cooper: So were there any class reunions that you went to and you saw some of those same faces that treated you so bad and they act like they never did anything?

Theodore Adams: I graduated from Orangeburg High School in 1968. I have only—I don’t know how many class reunions they had—but I have only been invited to one and that was the one they had
30:45 Theodore Adams: last year and I had planned on going, I had a death in the family and couldn’t. So I can’t really answer your question. I would imagine that they had many, many, many class reunions since 1968, but I was only invited to the one they had last year.

Kenneth Cooper: So you don’t see any of your former—I’m sure you probably remember—

Theodore Adams: Yeah I remember some of their names and I do encounter them, some of them, and when we encounter each other it’s like the bad things never happened. You know? Maybe they put it out of their heads but it’s hard for me to put out of mine, but I go along with the program. I can extend my hand and give you a shake and if you want to pretend you didn’t treat me bad then so be it. And you know I’m still working on that and I know I have to get to the point where I have forgiven them. But Kenneth, I’m not there yet. No, no I’m not. And I’m just being honest. I’m getting there, but I’m not there yet.

Kenneth Cooper: You know during the movement and desegregation, a lot of people like to feel that the church is where the movement came out of. Do you agree with that or did the church have a roll in Orangeburg desegregation?

Theodore Adams: The church has always been—the Black church—has always been the foundation of the Black community. The Orangeburg movement came out of the Black church and they were threatened. But the Black church in Orangeburg said that change had to happen and didn’t back away from it. Now that’s not to say that every church, every Black church, in Orangeburg was involved in the movement, but the church as a whole was. And there were people out of every Black church in Orangeburg that was involved in the movement. I know this because during the movement we went from church to church having our rallies and our meetings, planning what our next move was and anytime a pastor or a deacon would say, “No, you can’t meet here” somebody in that church would stand and say, “Unh unh, this is our church. We gone meet here.”

Kenneth Adams: I know we talked about you going to college and what not, but I can’t just help myself without asking this, how was graduation day for you? That day is one that a lot of high
Kenneth Cooper: school students look forward to, but how was that environment?

Theodore Adams: I look forward, really looked forward to graduating from Orangeburg High School. I wanted to get the heck out of there, but I also wanted to move on to the next level and go to college. The bad part was that it wasn’t the joyful day that I, you know? I’m sure when you graduated from high school there was the big graduation party, nah! Didn’t happen—well they might have had one but I wasn’t invited. The NAACP felt our pain and—who graduated with me? Tyrone Robinson, Slick I mean James Williams, Charietta Williams, Clarence Carmichael and maybe one other person—and the NAACP took us out to dinner, whatever we wanted and that was our party. And they thanked us for doing what we did, gave us all certificates. That was a joyous occasion. Now there was joy in marching across a stage, because in spite of it all, I made it. Barely, but I made it. And I’m sure that there was a lot of joy in my parents’ heart because I fought the good fight and won, but I’m sure there was probably more joy in their hearts that it was over for me.

Kenneth Cooper: So the prom, I’m stuck on this only two dances, and that’s your junior and then your senior prom. Who did you invite?

Theodore Adams: Well that was part of the problem. There was nobody to invite. And you had to get a special dispensation from the superintendent, actually, to allow us to bring dates from somewhere other than Orangeburg High. The whole reason for that was they really didn’t want us there, but they did allow it.

Kenneth Cooper: Can you hold for one second, I am terribly sorry.

Theodore Adams: Prom and you were saying that you had to get the—

Kenneth Cooper: Special dispensation from the superintendent to allow us to bring people from places other than Orangeburg High to the prom. The whole thing was they didn’t want us there.

Kenneth Cooper: So, I’m looking back thinking about what you said about some of the students, some of your friends, some of the other Blacks in the community didn’t really value you anymore or appreciate what you did. So I’m sure Wilkinson had parties, I’m sure there were other things in the community for the Blacks. Were you invited or did you attend?
Theodore Adams: I attended some of them. Some of them I didn’t attend because I knew that if I did, it was going to end up badly. To be totally honest with you, when you fight all day, you don’t want to have to fight all night too. So, Wilkinson had a lot of dances and they were well chaperoned. So, dances of that nature I would go to, but a lot of private parties in backyards, unh unh, because I knew what was going to happen then and wouldn’t go.

Kenneth Cooper: Well, what—

Theodore Adams: Well it was, I guess when I think back, what I can hear in my brain the most is he wants to be white. And that wasn’t it. And I’m hearing you want to be white, you think you better than we are, we don’t want to associate with you. That could develop into rock throwing and I just didn’t want to participate. But I did have some good friends at Wilkinson High School who, most of them, knew me from Christ the King or knew me from associating with some of the students at Felton Laboratory School. These were people who have always been friends and will always be friends. For me, my friends go way, way back. I’m fifty-eight (58) years old and I have friends now, true friends that I know of friends, we’ve been friends for fifty-seven (57) years. But these were the people who participated in the movement with me, went to jail with me, we were all threatened to be sent to reform school together. There was a period where we spent—generally when we got locked up for marching or sitting in or trying to go to the library, the county library—we get locked up for a day, the next day we were out. But there was this one incident where they locked us up for over a week. Our parents had to go to the governor to stop the bus from taking us to reform school. They were actually loading us on the bus. And the people I call friends now who are from Orangeburg and who still live in Orangeburg, we were all there together. And I know if I had gone to some of the backyard parties then if anything were to happen, they would have tried to help me, but why push the issue. I pushed it all day; again I didn’t feel the need to have to push it at night, especially with my own people.

Kenneth Cooper: That’s understandable. So Mr. Adams, is there anything else that you feel that really stands out or that you really want to share with us about your experience?
Theodore Adams: Yeah, not about my experience, but about the way I feel about my experience. I’m glad that I grew up in the household that I grew up in with the family support that I had who—how can I say it? I mean I’m glad that I am who I am and that I came from where I came from and that I did what I did and that my son didn’t have to do it.

Kenneth Cooper: So family support is something that really helped you through it?

Theodore Adams: Oh yeah. Oh yeah, yeah. I mean my momma was there, my daddy all my aunts, my uncles, my cousins. I couldn’t have gotten through it without them.

Theodore Adams: I mean there were, you know boys aren’t supposed to cry, but there was some nights when I shedded tears because I just didn’t—I just couldn’t understand what was happening to me, with me. And I knew that there were one or two cousins that I could go to and we could talk and it was alright for me to cry if that’s what I felt like doing. At that point and time in my life I didn’t want anybody to know that I cried so I knew that my tears were kept. I knew I had aunts and uncles that I could do the same with and everything was kept.

Kenneth Adams: Well Mr. Adams I really appreciate you taking the time out of your busy schedule for this interview.

Theodore Adams: Well, you know, I thank you for the opportunity for interviewing me because it’s therapeutic to me. You know I went all these years not talking about it, it’s festering. I think that’s why I still carry a little resentment, but now this is now our second time together and I’m feeling now that—more so than I did weeks/months ago—that I could encounter some of my classmates again and not feel as bad. I’m still not there, but I’m getting there thanks to opportunities like this. So, I thank you.