

# Ira Poole Interview Transcript

I'm Ira Poole. Started out as a young kid in Fayette county, Lagrange, Texas. From there I went to Houston and I graduated from Whitney High School in Houston, from really high school, and I went to Prairie View A&M College. From Prairie View college I came to Austin and I graduated from Huston Tillotson College and from Huston Tillotson I went and enrolled in the University of Texas.

I spent one summer there and then I came out to, as the dean told me, it would be nice if I would go get some experience, and so I got some experience as the band director. Seven separate schools supposedly separate but equal, but far from being equal.

And then, asking me to come and start a band, I took it to be serious. So when I went there, they had crappy material, embellishments for me to start where I was going to get their instruments repaired and fixed. And I came back to Austin and brought the salesman from the Reed Music Company to come down and speak to the parents and make sales of the instruments for the kids.

So I started the band, in three years we went to the state festival and we won sweepstakes, we won marching and concert. As a band in that neighboring town, we topped everything and every other school when marching in concert. After doing that, I thought I would be honored, so to speak.

The persons who were in authority over my employment called me and told me they didn't hire me to make little Louie Armstrongs out of the kids. Instead, I explored the whole area. That part of Texas. Other schools first, so to speak. And they had fired me. But because of the petition that the community had put up, they had to hire me back. Well I didn't stay, I came to Austin.

I came to Austin because after doing all the things that I've done over and over three years, they wanted me here at Austin. So I came to Austin and again I had a secondary teaching certificate, not in the elementary. But when I came here, they put me in the elementary school. I told them I didn't have an elementary teaching certificate. They said you were a band director and you were not a major in music, we want to see what you are going to do.

So I went into the elementary classroom. First of all, the whole room, all the inside of the school and all the other schools, painted white – no colors.

Bulletin boards. But the bulletin boards were not used. They had media for the subject, that was to be taught. But again, that was not used. In other words, whatever subjects you were teaching, you could employ different movies and what have you as a something to. Something

for the kids to rely on and learn more about what they were studying.

Well, I first started with the bulletin boards and I used the board much like the billboards they had for movies. Back then, whatever was going to be shown in the theater would have a show card.

It would be part of the pictures and that was to entice you to come in and want to see the movie. I used that same idea to entice the kids to whatever the subject we were going to study, and that was something new. So far as the kids are concerned.

The other side is I was not the teacher, I got to understand from the very beginning. I was not going to be the teacher. But then when I told them, "no, you are going to be your own teacher, each of you will be teaching yourself."

And that was strange. That was something new. We started when I come to school, we organized the classroom, the president, vice president. And so in the morning when they came to school, I did not open the class, instead the president called the class for order and he would bang the gavel three times, much like they did in Congress, whether it was Texas or the United States congress.

They learned to bang the gavel together three times. And the president said he was calling the class order. And then he would ask the classmates, "why are we here?"

And then he would rap the gavel two times for them to stand. They would stand and then recite the reason why they came to school and that was to practice honor and cooperation, and learning reading, writing, and arithmetic, and to do those things which will make future citizens of our community, our state, the nation and the world.

When it came time for whatever subject, whether it be social study science or arithmetic or mathematics, that was depicted on the bulletin board, just part of it. They would make it attractive for the students who wanted to see more into what we were going to study.

Now the day is over, the night is growing loud. Shadows of the evening still across the sky.

While I was attending school here at Huston Tillotson, I had a health condition. An allergy problem.

I couldn't just live any place. I was in the ROTC, which was reserve officer training, and I had to leave that because of that allergy. And it was some kind of chemical. Well, that kept me from going into service. I didn't go into the military because they said they would have a problem in placing me because of my allergy.

I went to live in Austin. And so I started looking for her spot in which I would like to be a home. I

lived at 1010 East 10th Street here in Austin, and I would take walks or we're going in different direction.

And I came this way from 1010 East 10 street, and I found a vacant piece of property that's where I would like to live on the spot. I would like to build a home. So then I had to go and find who this property belonged to. I found that it belonged to a Dr. Washington whose office was on 12th street. I asked him would he sell a part of this or would he sell all of it.

He said, we got plans to develop that, we're going to break it up into lots and put utilities. And so I asked him if he'd give me a chance to buy, and he said, yes. Even if he would sell right there, and when he did sell, I didn't have a penny to buy. But I was asking for and I'm still doing it, because right now I got a ranch and I want to build on that ranch.

Incidentally, when he did get it fixed up, he told me that he was ready to sell and if I weren't, it was my time and I could make a purchase of a lot. But I had to borrow the money and at the time I was teaching school, so I had to use the money that I was making.

The lot they were selling for \$3,000. From the time that I was ten years old, in Lagrange, my mother and father didn't make a decent salary. They were doing well to have a house for me to sleep and grow up. And not for me, for all of my siblings. So I wanted to find a way in which I could make money to support myself.

And I did. I went to a barber shop, and they had a shoeshine stand in this barber shop, and nobody was using it. So I asked the man if I could shine shoes there. He said, "yes. If you use that stand, you won't have to pay us. All you have to do is clean up the barber shop at the end of the weekend."

So each day instead of going to school first in the morning or the evening after school, I would go down and clean up the barber shop. And then I shine shoes on Saturday, on the weekend.

And the money that I made, I kept it. I started off shining shoes for \$0.10 a person, shine both shoes. That was cheap. But at the time. But at that time, a bottle of soda water cost a nickel.

So you see it wasn't very much that I was making. But then the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor and they opened Camp Swift in Bastrop and the soldiers were coming into town.

Now, I charge \$0.10 for shining shoes, but that didn't include maybe a nickel and dime that a person would tip me. I was making more money on a weekend than my dad was making in a month. That sounds strange and sounds funny, but that's the truth.

Well, let's go back to where we were. I then had to have some kind of source in which to get the money to buy the lot. Now the work was costing \$3,000. \$3,000 in that day was big money.

So the black teachers had black money. There was an association. It was a group put their money in savings. And so I went in and asked for money from that savings to buy. But I had to tell them then what I was going to do with the money that I would borrow. When they heard that I was borrowing the money to buy a lot, they wanted a lot.

So what they did is they came and bought the lot before I could because they had the money and I didn't. They had it in the savings. The lot that I wanted was the one right down here on the corner. That lady at that time was the president of the money association.

Oh, the gentleman across the street, he was the treasurer and she in turn came and bought the lot that I went to buy. He bought this lot. That's what he wanted. I went and bought on the lot that was on that corner there, where I am now. I was owing for the lot and I was working two or three jobs at that time to pay for the lot.

At the time I bought the lot, I kept it clean. I kept it going. I kept it looking good. But these people that bought it then had money to build. I didn't have money to build. I then was just working and paying the amount that I had borrowed.

And then came two gentlemen who saw me working on the lot. And they came over to me and said, "you own this?" And I said, "yes sir."

"Well, we own a lumber yard we just bought. And what we like to do is we like to build your house on this lot. And if you let us build it, we want to use our name to advertise our business."

I said, "That's fine."

And so then I explained and she said, "well, we can take care of that."

So what they did, they went and got a loan and they were in the process of financing people who wanted to build. So they said that they would finance my building. I told them, "I haven't paid for the lot."

She said we will get these people to pay off your lot and then you build, and then you just owe one fee.

I saved fine. In the meantime, other people were buying lots from Dr. Washington. Most of these people were building, and I wasn't. I didn't have the money to. They would come to me and say, "Poole, why don't you build everywhere? We all building."

And I said, "you all got money. I don't have money."

When the two gentlemen got the loan association to give money to them to build, then I have

my own plan that I put on paper. And so they say, "let us have the plan you have on paper and blueprint."

So what they did was they went and got a student from the University of Texas who was in architecture and had him draw what I planned on the paper.

We got together on it and we ended up with a house plan. I guess I still have those plans. We started building. I was single at the time because my wife had divorced me. I had a little money I was making from teaching. But anyway, when she got divorced, when she divorced me, then I had to pay for the divorce, my lawyer I had. And then I had to pay child support.

And I bought a new car to maybe attract her. Maybe we could stay together, but that didn't do anything. So I was stuck with paying for a new car, finding a place to live. As it was, I was outdoors. The law put me out.

I was running from one house to another. I had three jobs, I was working for Western Auto and I was doing work for a restaurant, but I wasn't bartending at that time. But I later started bartending. I was doing yards when I could. Anyways, I had the building going, so I no longer owed the finance people that were financing the lot, I then just owed the finance people that were financing the building of the house.

Okay, well and good. Ended up getting the house built, that was in 1964 that they completed the building. I moved in. I moved in, the appliances came with the house with no furniture. From Western Auto at that time, got furniture. Through working for Western Auto I was able to buy furniture.

The only furniture I was able to buy at that time was a mattress and a box spring, and I put that on the floor and I had to buy enough for my kids so when they came to be with me, they would have a place. Incidentally, I built the house just as I was going to build it had I not been divorced.

The house was a full size house. It's the house that I have now.

When I went back to get the third, I hadn't paid for it, I hadn't paid the first of the three year, but I never paid the credit union and I paid the credit union for the two year back. Plus I repay the loan people that let me have the money to build the house, pay off the bill.

The black credit told me, we can't let you have anymore.

At first it was something like \$3,000 I had to pay. Next time it was almost 2,500. I was indebted to them over \$5,000.

Plus paying my payments to the loan people. The gentleman suggested to me, "go back to the people that let you have the money to build the house. They let you have it because they know

that if they don't, the government would pick up your check and you won't be able to pay anybody.”

I went back to the loan people and just like he said, “yeah Mr. Poole, we'll lend you that money.”

They added that amount to what I had to pay for the house and the lot.

Now I have three jobs but I had to then start working, I started working for Western Auto, I was a bartender, I was working on weekends as a waiter. I was selling encyclopedias.

I knew I had those four jobs. I didn't get to bed each night until 1:00 and 2:00. Be up the next morning to be in the classroom.

In the classroom the things that I was doing were totally different from all the others. I was then put on days that we had special programs. I had to demonstrate to all the teachers in the Austin public school what I was doing in the classroom to inspire them to do it. University of Texas took on a subject in media in which the teachers then could take a course at UT to do the things that I was doing. That way I was not the one that had to have special meetings to go explain.

So all of these things were, first of all, how to use the old projector to draw things that I needed to put on the bulletin board. Construction paper. How to cut construction paper to use as a border, all these things that I had introduced into the classroom.

I have pictures of the room back then. But anyway. And then how you can make up some letters. Say we were studying the five classes of animals and I wanted to make a sign that said five classes of animals, I take those letters and lay them on butcher paper and then would go and paint and colorfully print those letters.

And then I would put it up on the bulletin board with this colorful construction paper and the border. And this was very attractive. It was all in different colors. Meanwhile, whole Austin public schools were in the process of repainting all the schools on the inside.

The paint, and those colors, it was discovered the colorful colors was inspiring and sharpening the brains of kids. Parents were wanting their kids to be in my room. Administration was having trouble with parents wanting to place their child in my room, which was fine with me. I had as many as 45 kids in my room.

There were kids that were in other rooms, the teachers couldn't handle them. The principals took those kids from those rooms and put them in mine. I had 45 kids at the time, nobody else in the public school had that many kids in their room, and it got to where they started limiting the number of kids that were in a classroom.

But that didn't help me much. When they got the word, they were having trouble. So then they

pulled me out of the classroom and put me in what we would call career awareness. Career awareness was being funded by the federal government, not the local school. So then I was given my salary, it was being paid to the school and the school would pay me.

And during that, I then saw the importance of Social Security. Other poor kids who didn't know that there was Social Security. I then went to the Social Security Administration on Sixth Street and I got applications. I bought a new truck and we filled it with applications, and I started taking applications to all the schools. So the applications was given to all kids that didn't have a Social Security card. There were a number of parents that didn't have a Social Security card. Austin public school has Social Security for teachers.

After I got Social Security for the teachers, then the city wanted to have Social Security. So the city got Social Security. Then after school got Social Security, the next somebody that wanted Social Security was the county. So the county got Social Security. And right then, throughout the county, the city, and Austin public school.

I was going to use my students and we would take the map of the United States, pour it in concrete, and then set it out. Go look for a Statue of Liberty, in some way involve the schools to buy the Statue of Liberty. And we would put all this in a strategic place on the school campus.

They wouldn't let me do it. So I said, "if you don't let me do it, I'll do it myself." Do it for myself. My house was where it is now. So what I did then, I cashed an insurance policy, got that money, and I used that money to buy a Statue of Liberty.

I bought 25 acres. At the same time I had to buy a small tractor to go with it. I brought that tractor over here and used it to mix the concrete, the food and concrete. Then I had to make the stand, I took it and built a scaffold for the stand. All of this was too heavy for me to use. But the guy across the street happened to do that.

And that's how I came up with the Statue of Liberty there in my yard. All of this had an influence on the property. They were maybe about two lots that Dr. Washington had not sold. That created an interest and there was two or three lots that he had not sold – when I came up with all of that, people had an interest in buying in this area. And that's how the area got to be as it is now. And that's how I got to be where I am now.

Take your cell phone and look up Ira Poole's yard.

This neighborhood will speak for itself, in other words, just what you are doing now is the result of what we've done in the neighborhood. That's the reason we are sitting here right now. That's speaking for itself.

That even goes with all the students that I've worked with. These students becoming their own teacher. They tell you quick, when they tell you one of the parents of a lot of these students,

most of will come to me and say, "Mr. Poole, what are you doing to my son? Oh, I used to have so much trouble trying to get him to wake up in the morning and put his clothes on and go to school. Now he's up on his own, dressing, and he's ready to go to school. And every time he opened his mouth, it was something about Mr. Poole, Mr. Poole. And I would tell him, If you mention the name Mr. Poole one more time, I'll go crazy."

That was the kind of interest that I had. Then the students came to me and said, "all these teachers are getting Teacher of the Year. Why aren't you ever Teacher of the Year?"

And I always had to pass that off. Every year somebody would come and ask me, "Mr. Poole, this year you didn't get to be Teacher of the Year. Why?"

I'm not pushing myself. I'm not doing it. I'm just telling you the facts and all that speaks for itself.

Why aren't you in some of these other people's that bought lots here? Why aren't you there now, instead of having me as the center? You see what I'm saying?

I got a ranch out there now. How many people do you see that have a ranch? How many teachers? How many teachers do you see that are 93 years old?

So once more you ask me how Washington is getting to be on its own. That's like the reason why you're here now.

I started a garden, one of the subjects that I had to teach was starting with seeds. So when I had bought 25 acres, and I always had a horse, our class was interested in learning to ride a horse.

When we finished studying that unit on seeds, then we would go to the country, to my place, a pliable plot of land out there, and they planted seeds. So they studied the seed, but here they planted it and they saw how important the seed was to them. The education that I had changed was that a student's reason for going to school was not to get an education, it is to prepare himself to live.