

**Bowen McDowell Wakefield**  
(Recorded interview September 22, 2000)

I was born in Pickens County on July 10, 1920.

I had six brothers and sisters and also three half brothers and a sister by my father's first wife. We had a total of 10 children in the family.

My father was Stewart Wakefield. My mother was Eula Griffin Wakefield. Her father was Peter Griffin.

I understood back in the slave days the masters had two families most of the time. They had a family by the black mama and one by the white mama. I understand the kids of the black mama were mulatto kids. They didn't have to go out in the farm and work. They were "in house" people. I guess my mother's grandfather was an in-house. I don't think he had to go out in the fields and work. My mother was the second generation from slavery.

In Pickens County there weren't too many big farms and they didn't have too much need for slaves. In Anderson County they had bigger farms and slaves. My father came from Anderson County, down about the Starr-Iva area. He probably got his name from some of those Wakefields down there.

I got the name Bowen from my mother's side. My brother next to me is Griffin Wakefield. The next one is James Ardis Wakefield. Ardis is the name of my daddy's brother. The baby boy was William David Wakefield. My oldest brother was named Peter Franklin Wakefield. He took grandfather's name – Peter. We generally had a tendency, back in those days, to take the names of people who were relatives. One of my sisters was named Beulah and one was named Julia. Beulah was named for my mama's sister who lived in Greenville. I stayed with my Aunt Beulah the first year I went to Sterling High School.

Our home had three bedrooms so we were pretty cramped as far as quarters were concerned, especially during the early years of my life. We had no plumbing or electricity. We had an outhouse. We had a well to draw water. We got to be in high cotton in about 1936 when we got an icebox. Prior to that if you wanted your milk cooled you put it in the creek branch and let the branch cool it. Or we put it in a bucket that we lowered in the well. You let it down but you didn't let it go all the way in the water. You would be surprised how cool that milk would get. It was just like coming out of the refrigerator. Mama got a telephone in about 1947.

T.A. Bowens was the owner of the farm we rented. He was the county agricultural agent for Pickens County. We sharecropped on his farm. All during my elementary schooling I worked in the fields and that went on until I went to Sterling High School in Greenville. We had cotton, corn and all the regular farm things. The children did most all of the farming because my father went to the mountains, Rocky Bottom and Table Rock, and worked as a cook. People would

come up in church groups and stay for a week or two weeks at a time. He would prepare meals and cook for them. That is the way he got his spending money because we didn't make that much off the crops. Sometimes you would break even, sometimes you would get a few dollars. It all depended on what the boll weevil would let you have.

We had chickens and hogs. We never went hungry. We had good gardens. It wasn't choice food but we got good nourishment. We got enough to fill us up.

Our house burned in 1946 and Mama lived with her cousin across the street. Daddy had a little money and we built a house back. We built a four or five-room house, a porch and all. We put plumbing in this one. That was in 1947. My brothers and I helped Daddy build it. We lived on land my people had scraped up enough money to buy. This was on our own land.

At that time we weren't doing as much farming as we previously were. Daddy would rent different plots of land. We didn't have enough acreage where we built to have more than a garden, maybe a patch of corn. Incidentally, we just sold this house about a year ago to a young man up in Pickens who is a cousin of ours, Fred Wakefield.

My daddy never owned a car. I got a car in 1951. My first car was a 1951 little old green Chevrolet, two-door Chevrolet. When I came to Anderson I had a car.

I only remember getting one thrashing from my father. We were in the field binding grain and I got in an argument with my sister. We threw down what we were binding and started scrapping with each other. Daddy hollered at us and made us stop. He went up and got a big old wild cherry switch about 3 feet long and sat down on a terrace. By golly, when he got through wrapping that thing around our legs it was a good lesson. That was the first and last whipping I ever remember getting – first and last.

When I was growing up blacks knew they were only supposed to drink from the colored water fountain and what have you. We were just pretty passive. Parents always reminded their children, "No, don't you do this or don't you do that." We had some disturbances in Pickens County with white boys. We used to have rock battles on Sundays. White boys were on one side of the branch and we were on the other side. We would throw rocks at each other until our parents found out we were holding these sessions every Sunday afternoon. The parents got together and stopped that. No one ever got hurt because I don't think anyone ever got hit.

We had one old boy who was always looking for a fight. We could kind of keep him under control and we didn't have any fights. The white people had school buses back then. They would ride by and call us names and try to spit on us if they were close enough. Most of the time we stayed our distance so they couldn't do that. I guess those things affected us a little bit – made us feel inferior to a certain extent.

I can say God bless my mother. She said, "You don't have to be short to nobody because you are just as good as anyone. It's what you believe Bowen. If you have got it in your head, nobody can take it away from you." My mother had a lot of wisdom. She didn't pass until 1979.

Those things affected us to some extent. We just had to believe. I have to give credit to my mother and father. They were Christian people who taught us we were just as good as anybody else. Your skin doesn't make a bit of difference.

I started to school in Pickens County. They called it Pickens County Training School. We lived about 5 miles from the school and went to school by horse and buggy. That was during my first and second grades. We would leave the horse and buggy at Ben Griffin's place. He lived near the school. Eight people rode on that buggy. We made it somehow.

The school operated to fit the farmers' needs. We would go up to about the first of May and then stop for planting time. We called it a split session. We had another session after the "laid by" time, which was after the 4th of July when they laid the crops by. I guess all told we got in about seven months of schooling.

My first school had three rooms. First and second grades were in one room; third, fourth, fifth and sixth in another; and seventh through tenth in another. I don't know how they managed. We got a brick building over on the other side of town after I finished fifth grade.

The county furnished land and the Julian Rosenwald Fund provided the bulk of the money. It was a foundation that built schools all over the South for black people at that time. In that building, we had six rooms and an auditorium. That was quite an improvement over that little old frame building. But the school was not accredited so I would never have been able to go from there into a college. That is why I had to go to Sterling, a black high school in Greenville. At Sterling I had to repeat the tenth grade because I was coming from a school that was not accredited – I did two years at Sterling, tenth and eleventh. The eleventh grade was as far as we went at that time. We didn't have a twelfth grade.

I don't ever remember getting a paddle while in school but it was quite prevalent back then. They even had a barrel they made you get over and boy they could really hit. They could put it on you. You didn't want one of those but one time. I always avoided that.

We were very fortunate because my mother had gone to State College in Orangeburg. She finished high school down there. She would have enrolled in the college program but the dormitory burned down and Dr. Miller who was the president of South Carolina State sent all the girls home and she didn't get back. My mother taught a lot of adults in Pickens how to read. They would come in for sessions in their spare time. She taught them the alphabet and reading and whatnot. I can remember vividly Dee Jones who was a brick mason. He said, "If it hadn't been for your mother, I never would have learned how to read." I thought that was quite something.

Mama was strictly for making us get to our work and do what we were supposed to do. We didn't have any money. We didn't ever know how I was going to go to college.

I was a member of a quartet at Sterling. I couldn't carry a tune in a paper bag when I started, but I got through it. The quartet would go around and sing in different places. I remember going up to Pinehurst, North Carolina, and singing at the golf course. Professor Harris, who was in charge of us, would always find some nice places to go and sing.

For being on that quartet, President Miller Whitaker, who was the president then of South Carolina State College, gave us a scholarship. SC State was then a black college. We didn't have to pay any board. We had to get up about \$75 for tuition a semester. I went for three years and the Army interrupted my schooling in my senior year.

I was inducted into the army at Fort Jackson in Columbia. From there I went to Fort Benning, Georgia. I was transferred from there to Little Rock, Arkansas. I was a member of the 599th Field Artillery Battalion. After I completed my basic training in Little Rock, Arkansas, we were transferred to Fort Huachuca in Arizona, where we took desert training.

We were known as Buffalo Soldiers. It was a name originally given by the Indians to the black soldiers who rode out of Fort Huachuca. I was in the headquarters battery which consisted of a little over 100 men at that time. We were the communication battery. We were responsible for laying of telephone lines and radio communication between the artillery and the infantry. My outfit was referred to as "liaison." I was a buck sergeant at that time, the highest rank liaison could offer. I had a corporal and a private I supervised. We were responsible for directing the fire of the 55-mm Howitzers and the 155-mm guns.

We were sent to the European theatre. When we landed in Italy we bivouacked not too far from Viareggio. We stayed there about two or three weeks and received intensive training. Then we were sent to the front. We supported the 442nd Japanese-American regiment. They were the infantry and our artillery battalion was their support. We had the big guns. I was a forward observer. I had to direct the fire – give the coordinates and direct the fire so they would know where to drop the shells. We were always the first ones to get shot at by the mortars because they would want to knock the communications out. I had a friend from Chicago, Corporal Justice. I guess he was about 10 feet from me when he got killed by a mortar shell that dropped in his foxhole while we were up there directing fire. That was the day of the push in 1945 when the Germans surrendered. The first battle that we were in was the Honor River crossing. The next one was Core Valley and the North Pyrenees was our last battle.

The 10th Mountain Division had been trained to go up the North Pyrenees but instead they sent the 599th Field Artillery, the 365th Infantry Regiment, the 366th and the Japanese. We got to do a little mountain training. We had to pull all of our equipment up the steep mountains. I had to pull my radio up behind me. I think we would have eaten Mark Clark alive if we could have gotten him because he was the man who was in charge of the 5th Division at that time and the man giving all of the orders. The thing that really pissed us off was that the 10th Mountain Division that trained in America for mountain fighting just marched down in the valley. Here we were, Japanese and the blacks, pulling up the mountains. You really had to keep your cool and I guess do a lot of praying. That was the only way we made it.

My oldest brother was in the Army. He was in the 365th Infantry. We bumped into each other over in Italy. I was on a jeep coming down the road and there were infantrymen walking along. I heard something, "Hey, Bowen!" I thought, "Who in the heck knows me over here?" It was my brother. I said, "I will see you later." We were coming off the front and had to shower and delouse and all that type of thing. I told him I would be back. We met and had a good chat. I hadn't seen him in five or six years. That was one of the most amazing things.

The white soldiers thought if they told the Italian girls that we had tails the girls wouldn't fool with us. The Italian girls kind of liked the color of the black soldiers for some reason. They used to say we were *multi bella*. *Multi bella* meant we were very handsome boys. I guess the white soldiers were a little bit jealous. So they thought if they could put some tails on us the girls wouldn't fool with us.

I was in the military about 38 months.

After I got out of the service (I was discharged from Fort Bragg on January 5 or 6, 1946) I went back to school and completed my training at South Carolina State. I had to go two years because the curriculum had changed. I finally got my Bachelor's degree in 1947. From there I went on to New York University on the GI Bill and got a Masters degree in personnel guidance and administration.

I only ever applied for three jobs and I only had those three jobs. My first job was at a high school in Charlotte. I taught English and mathematics in Second Ward High School. I taught there for two years. It was an all black high school. It was located down in what they called the second ward area. A fellow by the name of Dr. Garringer was the superintendent at that time. There is a high school named after him which is still in operation now but Second Ward no longer exists. I got kind of fed up with that system so I applied for a job in Columbia.

I got that job at C. A. Johnson High School in Columbia. I worked down there exactly one year and heard about an opening in Anderson for a new school they were building. I thought, "Well, I think I will take a plug at that."

I sent a letter of application to Dr. Mark Hawthorne and sure enough I heard from him. He invited me about two weeks after he got the letter to come up for an interview. I interviewed with him the first time and we talked about everything. About a week or 10 days later, he invited me back for a second interview. At that time he had three of the board members there. Roy Coffee was on the board. He said, "Well, Mark, he is mighty young isn't he?" Dr. Hawthorne replied, "Yes, he is young and inexperienced but how can he get experience if we don't give him the opportunity." So, with that I got the job.

That was the beginning of Westside High School in 1951. The high school was all black. We had grades ten through twelve. I had about 375 students my first year. They took the top three grades from Reed Street School and brought them to the new building.

Westside continued to grow and we continued to push things. During that time, 1952 through 1959, I worked under Dr. Hawthorne. He was eventually relieved of his position. Dr. Hodges came in from Greenville. We didn't have any type of salary schedule or personnel policies or anything like that during Dr. Hawthorne's administration. When Dr. Hodges came in that is all he did. He stayed behind a desk and wrote policies and salary schedules and things like that. It was during his tenure that I started getting a decent salary. I had threatened Dr. Hawthorne one time that if he didn't raise my salary I was going back to Columbia as a teacher because I was making more in Columbia as a teacher than he was paying me as a principal. After we got some policies and got things established, things started picking up.

I wasn't satisfied with the type of program we had at Westside. I told them we needed some shops, some commercial programs for girls, and we needed to expand. In 1965, they put on an addition and we got brick masonry, carpentry, auto mechanics, cosmetology, business education and similar types of things. We got a science lab.

Being a black school, they always wanted to give us some hand-me-downs. I wasn't a man for taking hand-me-downs. On one occasion I didn't have enough chairs for my classrooms. They sent me over some scratched up chairs that weren't being used in one of the white schools. I raised Cain and got new chairs the next week from Fant's Book Store.

I had it pretty rough. I never will forget a lady who was a principal at Cleo Bailey School. She had a janitor who had a young girl who was an eleventh grade student at Westside. We just happened to bump into each other in the superintendent's office one day. I was getting my mail. She said, "Oh, wasn't this bad about Manse's little girl. He is such a good darky." I said, "Darky? What's a darky?" She flew over to Mr. Hawthorne's office and wanted to know, "Is Mr. Wakefield a Yankee?" I thought that was very cute. "Is Wakefield a Yankee?"

In North Carolina and Columbia, they just had one principals' meeting, white and black would meet together. At my first principals' meeting in Anderson they didn't tell me otherwise. There were Hiram Sandlin, Wallace Reid and all of these guys sitting around. I just walked into the principals' meeting because I thought we all met together. I was supposed to have waited until that one was over and then there was going to be a second principals' meeting with the black principals. I think I kind of messed up their business that day. They let me sit and didn't say anything but I finally got the message that I wasn't supposed to be there that early.

Professor Perry had wanted the job as principal of Westside High School. Perry was at Reed Street School. He thought he was going to get the high school but Dr. Hawthorne and the board brought me in as principal of the new building. I guess I would have been envious too if I had been here all those years and they just ignored me and brought some young person in to head up the new facility.

I was quite different from Professor Perry. Prof. Perry was strictly an "Uncle Tom." I didn't wear that shoe. I think that is what helped me greatly and also I guess, in a lot of cases, it hindered me. Some white people thought I was too forward and too arrogant. It wasn't that. It

was a matter of trying to be treated as a human being and seeing things in the right perspective. I didn't feel that I had to bow or scrape to anyone.

I had Perry's wife working with me. Do you think she helped me? No. I will never forget my first graduation. I had Coach William Roberts, who was the only one I could rely on back then, get my diplomas in order alphabetically. Perry's wife came over to where the graduation was to be held before we got there. She shuffled up the diplomas. John Brown came up there and the name on the diploma was James Johnson. It just so happened I knew all of the graduates by name so I told them, "You take this and we will straighten it out later." I would call the kids' names and just give them a diploma. The kids got together after the ceremony and got the correct diplomas.

Mrs. Perry would try to do anything to make me look bad. I went to Dr. Hawthorne at the end of my first year and told him, "I am on my way back to Columbia if you don't move Mrs. Perry out of Westside. I don't need her over there." Dr. Hawthorne said, "Don't be too hasty." I said, "No, I don't need her. You send her back over to Reed Street because I can't work with that woman and I am not going to put up with it." I had to be kind of rough back then. That was the only way I could survive.

Coach Roberts had come the same year I did. Naturally you have a tendency to trust the people who come along the same time you do. So that is why I used him quite a bit. I think Coach Roberts has a lot to do with why Westside is still Westside.

I was able to get the school qualified and inducted into the South Carolina Association of Colleges and Schools. They sent in a team of about 12 people who stayed for three days inspecting the school. They looked at the curriculum and just about everything. After acceptance things began to take shape.

In preparation for integration a new high school was built for the 1971-1972 school year. The old Westside High School facility was to be closed and I was to be principal of the new school.

A board member came over to Westside to interview me relative to the naming of the new building. He said, "Wakefield have you given consideration for what we should name the new school?" I said, "No, why should that be a problem? You took Hanna from Greenville Street and carried it on out on Highway 81. It was still Hanna. What is wrong with Westside being Westside? It is still on the west side of town. We've got our uniforms for the band, our alma mater, football team, an up-going program plus the success that black students have already made from Westside. We have been successful. Are you going to throw away all of this to name a new building and start all over again? We have established our goals and philosophies here." I said, "No, I haven't even given it a thought." He thanked me and went on back. The next thing I heard came out in the paper that the new building would be named Westside. There were people who were clamoring. Some were wanting it to be Lakeside High and they had all kinds of names for it – anything but Westside because Westside denoted blacks. There are still people in this town who think of Westside as black.

Many of the white kids moved out of the district and went to Hanna. They ran like rabbits. They didn't want to come to "that black school." There were children living with their aunts and their uncles and their grandparents and everything else. Some of them just actually moved – lock, stock and barrel. I think they're still skipping across town. I think that's just one of those things we have to go through.

A good number of those who stayed were upper class. There were doctors' boys there and people like that. They were on this side of Anderson. They didn't run. They sent their children on to Westside. That helped tremendously. I guess that first year the ratio in terms of white and black was 70 percent black to 30 percent white. It eventually reversed itself. When I retired the ratio was 75 or 80 percent white – just the opposite of what it was in the beginning.

My son's class was the first one to finish at the new building. We had the kids under pretty good control – maybe a little fractious every now and then but it didn't amount to very much. I shall never forget the first day of integration when the kids came over to Westside, the white kids. A couple of boys bowed up to each other. Keith McDuffie was the black boy but I can't think of the white boy's name right now. I stepped between them. I said, "Listen fellows, we are not going to have any of that if you plan to stay here. We won't have none of that." Word must have gotten around, because I don't recall having another incident where blacks and whites were at each other's throats.

I had some trouble with white and black parents – especially with mothers of cheerleaders. They would almost fight you about getting those girls on the cheerleading squad. We had one little girl who violated the rules and an advisor to the squad had to put her off. Dr. William Royster was then superintendent. A board member tried to go to her defense and came to me to get her back on the squad. I said, "I am not even going to talk with you about it. I am not responsible to you. I am responsible to Dr. Royster. If you want to talk to Dr. Royster about it go to him." She went to Royster and he backed me up 100 percent.

I didn't have a paddle when I was teaching, I had a leather strap. The old boys at every reunion we have now tease me about how I could swing the strap. I think that helped back in those days. You can't touch them now. You can hardly look at them.

About the time of integration of the schools, paddling pretty much stopped. At that time, since I had two assistant principals, I didn't have to do any paddling. I know Mr. Roy Mack did a little paddling even after integration – both white and black.

I have been involved I guess in just about everything you can name. I was on boards for the Boys Clubs, Salvation Army, United Way, the hospital and Vocational Rehab. I worked 15 years on the Anderson County Election Commission and that was really a learning experience for me. That was a degree in political science almost. It was one of the most challenging things I have done since I came to Anderson. We had some protests during the time I was chairman of the commission. I had to preside like a judge. I had to sit up there and conduct the thing. That was really something.

In 1962, we organized the teachers' credit union and I served seven and a half years as secretary and treasurer. I kept the money, banked the money, made the loans and everything else. My wife used to get after me because I had to do that after school hours. I would go back to school and do all of that work because I didn't have time to do it in the day. I am still on the credit union board. I've been involved with churches as a deacon, trustee and have served as a Sunday school superintendent. The biggest thing I am working with now is the Foothills Community Foundation.

I have never been very active in the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, but I have always been a member. I never took a leadership role. I agreed with some of the things they were doing but not all things. I still supported them financially.