Stuck in a Hard Place

James “Jimmy” Hurt had just completed sixth grade when he was told by his parents that the Prince Edward County public schools were closing. It was the year 1959 and an estimated 3,300 students, including Jimmy, were denied public school education. His situation would transition from the well-financed Farmville Elementary at Longwood College in current day Hiner Hall to such locations as the Farmville Moose Lodge and the Farmville Baptist Church.

The new locations seemed “make shift” compared to what was available at Farmville Elementary. There were no typical school amenities such as a playground or lunchroom and books were of limited supply. The classes were divided into four sections all in one big room of the lodge. “We had roll around room dividers…. you could see into the next class and heard what was going on the other side of the divider.” There was also another class in the coat room. The lodge was additionally used as a club house or for dances on the weekends. Jimmy remembered he could occasionally still smell the smoke and beer from the weekend festivities.

For eighth grade, Jimmy attended classes in the basement of the Farmville Baptist Church. The rooms down there allowed more privacy for learning than the large room of the lodge. “The overall operation was more fine-tuned. The second year everyone was settling in, I guess.” Prince Edward Academy had classes held in fifteen buildings in Farmville during this time. “When each grade is in a separate part of town…. we missed being with other students from other years. You missed seeing them in the lunch rooms, library and hallways…. It made things different….not bad. We were isolated in one building.” For Jimmy, those two years were best described as simply being different and took getting used to. “Others in town had no school, so I would say I was lucky to have been able to get over to the Moose Lodge and the church.” Eventually after two years, in 1961, the Prince Edward Academy Upper School building was constructed and Jimmy would start ninth grade here.

Jimmy grew up as an only child in a middle-class house with very business-minded parents. Jimmy’s mother, Rosa Hurt, was a respected figure among the teachers and parents of Prince Edward County and held office as PTA president before the school closings. Around the time of the academy opening, there was no kindergarten available for the children of working parents. With pressure from these parents in need of childcare, Rosa saw this as an opportunity to fill the gap and open her very own independent kindergarten service, expanding from a small daycare she previously ran.

Her business quickly grew to around 100 children. Rosa’s income had without a doubt increased from the school closings, but she always remained focused on the youth. Jimmy remembers his father saying that “every nickel she took in, she spent it back on the kids.” Rosa’s kindergarten service had mostly white children, with some children of Asian descent. Jimmy does not recall there ever being any official policy disallowing African-American children from attending, but he also doesn’t recall any ever applying to attend either.

Jimmy’s father, Robert Hurt, had opened his very own grocery store, Bob’s Super Market, on the first of April, 1959. When the school closings happened just four months later, Jimmy remembers hearing his parents discuss serious concerns that they had opened a new business at a bad time in Farmville. He recalls his father saying, “If I could put wheels under that store I would move it to another town.” But despite these concerns, the store would operate well enough for many years. However, one of Jimmy’s friends, a girl whose dad worked at the local theater, left town with her family because they didn’t want to get involved with segregation and tuition costs. The rising tuition costs forced many families to move just like Jimmy’s friend, or send their children to different counties in search of provided education.

Jimmy would get picked up from school at the Moose Lodge and be taken directly to his father’s store until closing time. He recalls that the children of workers there would follow the same process of staying at the store after school hours. The grocery store did not discriminate in employment or service, so Jimmy remembers spending time at the store with children of black or white skin and getting along just fine with no tension. To Jimmy, it seemed that the whole issue of segregation was only apparent within the schools, based off his personal experiences. It didn’t matter to him or other children he knew: “all the kids were caught in this.” Jimmy mentions that he didn’t question this divide because of the values at the time expected that the youth didn’t question parental or school authority and did as they were told. The community seemed to go along with it, rather than try to fight it. The media would eventually come into town asking questions about the issues. Jimmy was told by his parents and teachers to stay out of it and respond with “no comment” if any questions were asked to him.

In twelfth grade, Jimmy left Prince Edward Academy to start a family of his own. He began working full-time at his father’s store and did so for a majority of his life. Jimmy is now retired and still contributes to the local community as the president of the Farmville - Prince Edward Historical Society. Looking back at the whole series of events with the school closings, Jimmy reflects, “It held up the town a couple years. . . . What good did it do?” The closings were a speed bump on the town trying to resist changes towards equality in America. This period in Prince Edward County is an important part of the history in the fight for civil rights here in Virginia.