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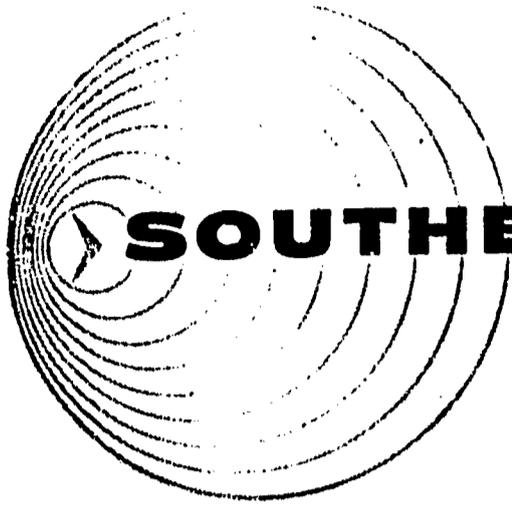
WEWAHITCHKA TOOK A CHANCE ON OBLIVION.
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THE SCHOOL SYSTEM IN WEWAHITCHKA, FLORIDA, WITH A LARGE NUMBER OF DISADVANTAGED STUDENTS TYPIFIED MANY OF THE PROBLEMS OF STRUGGLING RURAL AMERICAN SCHOOLS. IT WAS RESET WITH EVEN MORE CLASSROOM PROBLEMS WHEN SCHOOL AND TOWN LEADERS VOLUNTARILY DECIDED TO DESEGREGATE ALL GRADES IN AN EFFORT TO AVOID THE FINANCIAL NEED TO CONSOLIDATE WITH A NEIGHBORING COMMUNITY. (THE SHIFT TO BIRACIAL SCHOOLS OCCURRED WITHOUT INCIDENT.) FOUNDATION GRANTS PROVIDED FOR SCHOOL CONSTRUCTION AND INSERVICE TEACHER TRAINING, AND A SMALL AMOUNT OF FEDERAL FUNDS SET UP A REMEDIAL READING PROGRAM AND PERMITTED THE PURCHASE OF SOME EQUIPMENT AND LIBRARY BOOKS. MANY STUDENTS OF BOTH RACES WERE FOUND TO BE BELOW GRADE LEVEL IN COMMUNICATION SKILLS AND TO NEED INTENSIVE REMEDIATION. AMONG STAFF THERE WERE SEVERAL POORLY TRAINED OR UNCERTIFIED PERSONNEL. TEACHERS HAD BEEN OUTSPOKEN IN THEIR CRITICISM OF THE PAUCITY OF COUNTY AND STATE SCHOOL ALLOCATIONS AND OF THE ADMINISTRATIVE NEGLECT. NEVERTHELESS, TEACHERS HAVE BEEN AFFECTED POSITIVELY BY THE NEW ATMOSPHERE IN THE SCHOOLS, AND SOME INNOVATIVE EFFORTS HAVE BEEN ATTEMPTED. HOWEVER, THE BURDEN OF CULTURAL IMPOVERISHMENT AND THE LIMITED ECONOMY OF THE AREA REMAINS AS A SERIOUS HANDICAP TO THE POTENTIAL FOR EDUCATION IN THIS TOWN. THIS ARTICLE WAS PUBLISHED IN THE "SOUTHERN EDUCATION REPORT," VOLUME 3, NUMBER 1, JULY-AUGUST 1967. (NH)



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WEWAHITCHKA

WEWAHITCHKA TOOK A CHANCE ON OBLIVION

BY CLAYTON BRADDOCK

BY MOST STANDARDS accepted in this nation today, Wewahitchka High School in Florida's panhandle region southwest of Tallahassee should not even exist. It is a catalog of things that a high school should not be. It is ridden with many of the ills of the struggling rural American school.

An unexpected break with Deep South tradition—the voluntary decision in 1965 by school and town leaders to desegregate totally and immediately all 12 grades of the school—saddled it with even more classroom problems. Yet, that same decision may mean new life for Wewahitchka High. The decision, admittedly made as an alternative to the much-feared abandonment of the school, could have been a killing blow to the little community of 2,000 persons. The year before, a Gulf County referendum approved moving the county seat from Wewahitchka, where it had been since the county was formed in 1925, to Port St. Joe, the county's coastal center of the paper industry.

The school faces the future with:

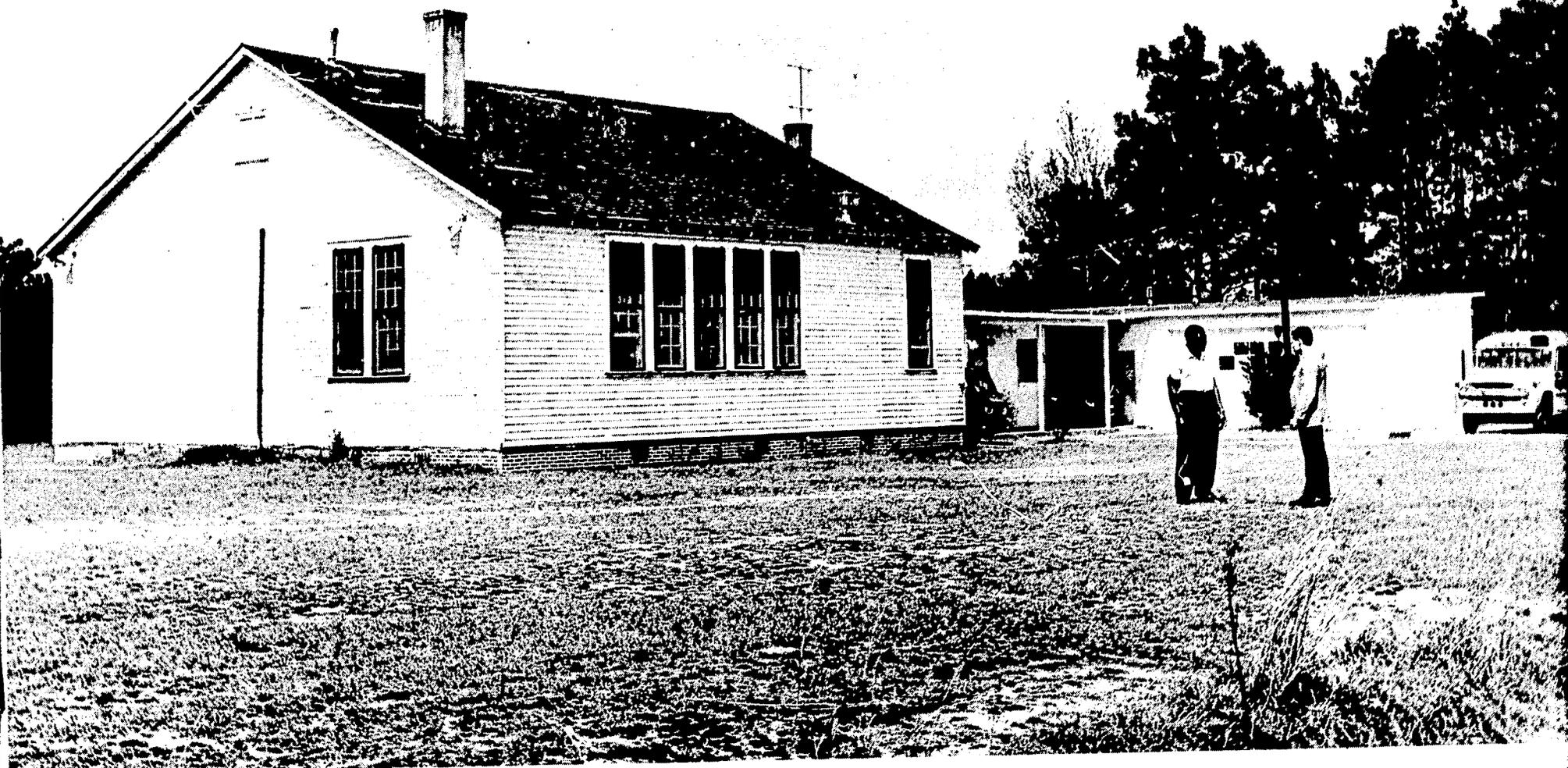
- A 40-year-old main building and a campus of scattered classroom facilities, including two separate sites each about a mile from the central school.
- A high-school student body—135 pupils in grades 10-12—too small to be offered the necessary depth and breadth of curriculum.
- A shortage of teachers, especially quality instruc-

tors and specialists; some known cases of unfit teachers; some untrained and non-degree teachers; and some faculty teaching outside their certified fields.

- A large percentage of disadvantaged students.
- Only a trickle of federal aid because most of its poverty-disadvantaged students are from families with incomes just above the minimum federal requirements.
- An already serious dilemma of the struggling culturally deprived made worse by the sudden injection of most of the area's poor and poorly taught Negro students into the previously all-white school—with another 100 due to magnify the problem next fall.
- A general lack of money, which has resulted in teacher salaries being \$700 below the state average and behind in competition with surrounding cities and counties; a \$50 per-teacher annual limit for purchase of classroom supplies, only half of the amount school leaders think it should be; and an overall per-pupil expenditure of \$393, just \$11 more than the state average.
- A small, one-room library with 5,300 books to serve all 12 grades—more than 2,000 volumes short of the desired minimum.

This is a dark view of any school and the obstacles to its improvement, but Wewahitchka High School is considered "reasonably typical of rural Florida," said the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools in

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James Rouse (left), teacher at Carver site, and David Bidwell, assistant principal, confer outside what used to be Carver High School. An addition to the old building is at right.

a report which led to approval in April of a \$337,245 grant to establish a program in communication skills at the school. The grant is part of \$1,144,865 given by the Danforth Foundation of St. Louis to help schools in Wewahitchka, Wheeler County, Ga., and Overton County, Tenn. Dr. Merrimon Cuninggim, Danforth president, also announced a \$652,000 grant to SACS for central administration of the project in all three school systems. The Wewahitchka grant will be spent to employ special reading and speech teachers and a "school-home-community agent" who will help involve parents and the community in school affairs. The money will also allow purchase of special equipment and materials.

The school, which serves the northern part of the county, has plans to solve some of its own problems; there is about \$500,000 in the bank to start construction of a new building in the 1967-68 term. This will eliminate the aging one-room building at the rear of the central plant now being used as a home economics classroom, two temporary third-grade classrooms, a rented wooden bungalow across the street now serving as an art room, and the two isolated classroom sites far from the main campus.

But this would only penetrate the outer layer of the purely material problems. There is a breath of change faintly circulating around both students and teachers

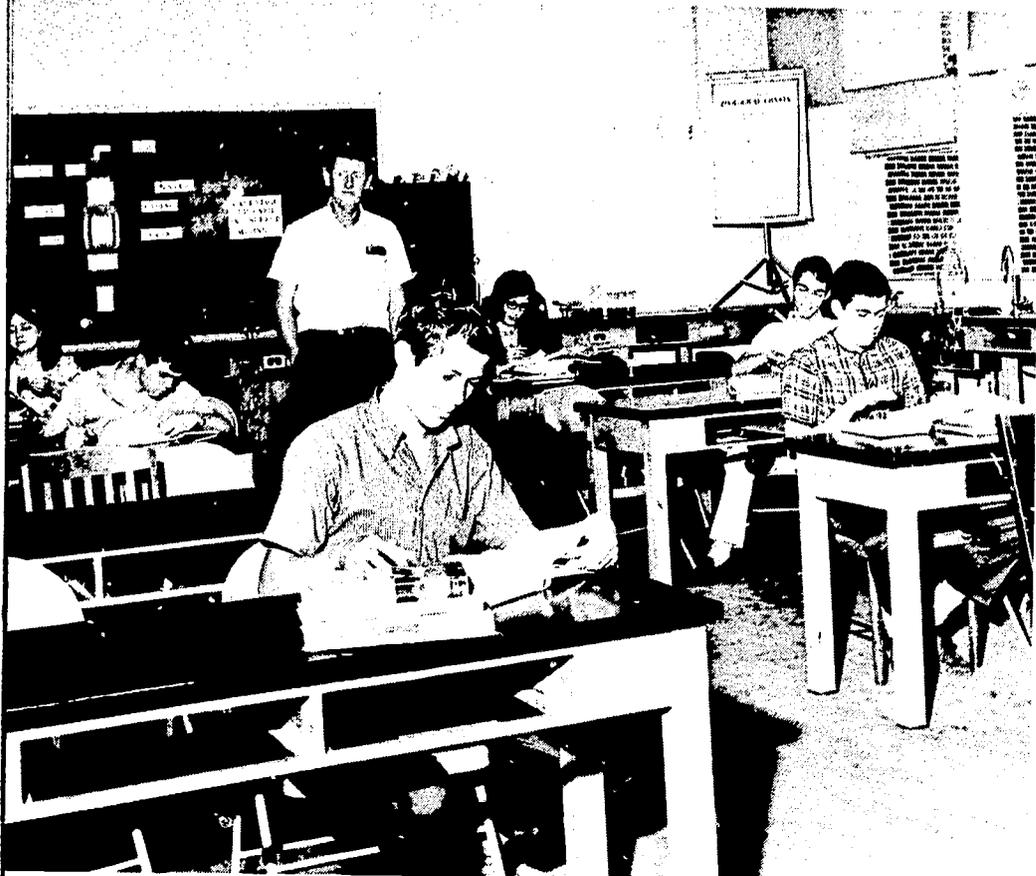
that might do more to solve the real human problems—even in the present school buildings. In the air is the light breeze of awareness and discovery, not the sudden storm of revolution.

In one way or another, the new atmosphere is related to the decision to desegregate the school. It would be a mistake to expect to find in Wewahitchka a complete rout of Deep South opinions on the race issue and the eradication of suspicions from both whites and Negroes. Complete and voluntary desegregation, organized and led by prominent white people, was admittedly pushed as the alternative to eventual consolidation with schools in Port St. Joe. But the decision has produced, along with problems, newer motives and subsequent benefits beyond what anyone would have predicted in 1965. Of course, the year before, nobody would have predicted anything.

"Three years ago, I would have said this would be the last place in the world it [desegregation] would have happened," said Harrell Holloway, a veteran teacher at Wewahitchka High who became its principal last year.

White leaders, headed by school-board member Joseph K. Whitfield, called meetings of white and Negro parents to spell out the desegregation plans. There was a mixture of open willingness and passive acceptance among most white parents. In the Negro

*... desegregation became a fact
in the life of Wewahitchka residents
—and without incident*



This meagerly equipped laboratory is Wewahitchka's only permanent one for biology, chemistry and physics, although a portable lab is sometimes used. Supplies for all three courses are stored in a small closet.

community, there was acceptance but a general suspicion and even fear of the consequences of the unprecedented move.

There were some fears among Negro parents for the safety of their children, said James Rouse, Negro teacher at the "Carver site" (formerly Carver High School and now part of the Wewahitchka school complex). But generally there was a fear that the students "were not going to be secure" in the strange and different atmosphere which would suddenly include white students, Rouse said.

But desegregation became a fact in the life of Wewahitchka residents—and without incident. Many people feel that the smooth transition was aided greatly by the summer recreation program at the school, quietly desegregated under the supervision of former principal William H. Linton.

Rouse himself is both a fact and symbol of the winds of social and educational change at Wewahitchka. To residents of areas accustomed to seeing more and greater strides by Negroes out of the grip of poverty, his case would not be as important as it is in the little Florida community. Rouse is the first graduate of old Carver High to graduate from college. He received his B.S. degree from Florida A&M last June. He began teaching in the fall, a few days before his eldest child enrolled for her freshman year at Florida A&M.

Only a look back to the conditions at old Carver High School can reveal sharply the change that has come with the move of most students into Wewahitchka High—lacking as the present program may be at the formerly all-white school. At Carver, 180 students in all 12 grades were taught in an aging wooden frame building hardly larger than a three-bedroom home. The faculty consisted of no more than five teachers and often as few as three, with combinations of grades at all levels. There was no cafeteria and no space for one if there had been funds to build it. Before desegregation, a four-classroom, concrete-block building was added, providing some improvements.

Although Wewahitchka High is now biracial, the Carver site enrollment in grades 1-4 is all Negro. There was no room for these youngsters at the main campus, but they will be moved there during the 1967-68 year. Classes for five sections of grades 4-6 at the Linton site east of the main campus (where the new high school will be built) are completely desegregated, as are grades 7-12. There are 85 Negroes attending classes with white students now.

The school is receiving some additional outside help, including \$10,000 a year from the Noyes Foundation to provide teachers with in-service training to meet their problems, and a small amount of federal funds to set up a remedial reading program and to buy a few pieces of science equipment and books for

the library. The countywide school budget of \$1,851,128—most of it from state funds—is shared by Wewahitchka High and four schools in Port St. Joe.

Yet, outside aid to the school will not be as great a benefit as will the faculty's and administration's new awareness of the problems of their disadvantaged charges—an awareness startlingly heightened by the sudden arrival of the Negro students who brought with them burdens of poverty and poor education even greater than those of the whites. In one third-grade class at the Carver site, the achievement levels of the pupils range from first-grade performance to not quite up to the third-grade level. In contrast, a third-grade class at the main campus ranged from mid-second-grade to fifth-grade work. In a Carver fourth-grade room, the composite scores ranged from 1.7 to 4.1 while Linton site fourth-graders ranged from 2.8 to 5.3. There is a wide gap between IQ's of most Carver students and the white students at Wewahitchka High. The teachers have taught the disadvantaged before, but this new insight into the constrictions caused by poverty will be the foundation of their task in the future.

"Even the better students are way behind in writing, reading, listening and spelling," said Mrs. Barbara Shirley, a junior-high English teacher. Sitting through two of her classes is a lesson in the agonizing and painfully slow job of teaching students who have to struggle every moment to grasp fundamentals, even those normally taught in elementary classes.

"They have never been taught the basic reading skills," said Mrs. Holloway, wife of the principal, who teaches the high-school remedial reading classes. "If they have never seen a word, they don't know how to attack it," she said. There are 56 students under her tutelage, including 31 Negro youngsters. "And we are not taking care of all who need it," she added.

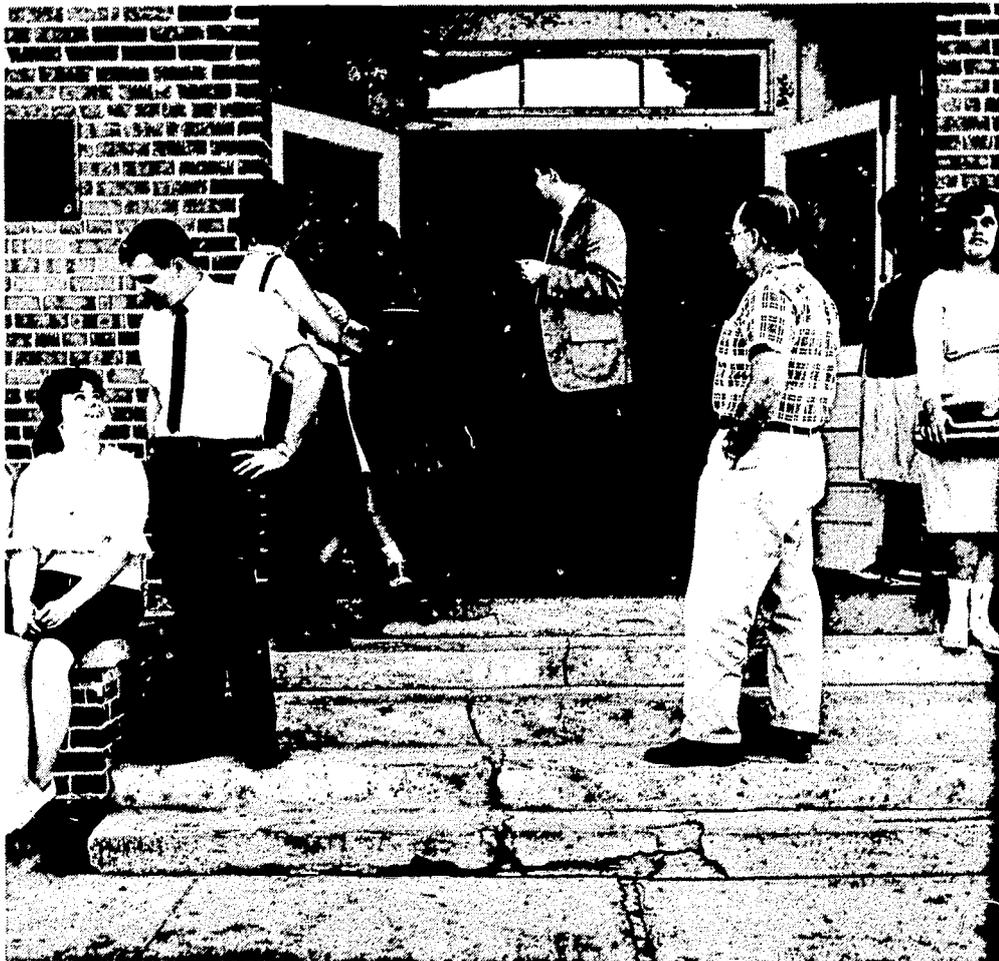
Mrs. Martha Lanier, who has taught school 21 years, directs the elementary reading laboratory for 65 students in grades 3-6. More than half of them are Negroes, but 20 or more white and Negro pupils are in serious need of help in the "communication skills." Lack of skills is just part of the children's problems. They also lack confidence and ambition, both stifled by their environment and backgrounds. "They just didn't know they could read," said Mrs. Lanier. Many of the youngsters are acquiring skills, confidence and ambition with the help of the teachers and the well-equipped reading laboratory.

Mrs. Lanier and Mrs. Holloway, and a third reading specialist paid for with local funds, are among the few Wewahitchka faculty members with real qualification and experience in helping the disadvantaged. Innovation, in fact and spirit, is noticeably lacking in many classes, partly because of the county school system's inability to attract many of the more qualified teachers. In spite of the presence of some good teachers, the overall condition is reflected in two teachers, one at Carver site and another on the main campus, who have only two years of college training. Two or



Principal Holloway presides over a "happening."

Assistant Principal David Bidwell stands in doorway of 40-year-old main building. On steps (in sport shirt) is agriculture teacher Hugh Semmes.





Mrs. Martha Lanier stirs interest in remedial reading laboratory.

more teachers have failed to pass the National Teachers Examination. The school needs certified teachers in foreign language, junior-high science, physical education and guidance.

Still, some of the teachers show both innovation and energy, as well as a serious effort to maintain standards.

"I will not teach down," said Mrs. Hugh Semmes, a sixth-grade teacher and wife of the agriculture teacher in the high school. "I will not lower my standards below that of the sixth grade." She had just put down a large bowl of what appeared to be Jell-O, grass, leaves and something else—an edifying if not edible means of showing the earth's stratification. A few moments later, she was out in the playground supervising a popular kite-flying contest.

While individual efforts to help students have been made, schoolwide programs to meet the challenges of poverty seldom have been attempted. "We tried many programs, but they always failed," said Anthony McCarty, a former music teacher now retired and working as a substitute. "It wasn't that the teachers didn't try. There wasn't any organization at the administrative level."

The new atmosphere at the school, undramatic as it may appear, has brought on "a new interest in creativity" among the faculty, said McCarty. He said there is also "more emphasis on knowledge of fact."

Some new schoolwide projects are showing general interest on the part of the faculty and administration.

One is called the "I Care" program, started in the high school at the urging of Miss Diane Lay, an attractive young seventh-grade science teacher who saw it tried when she taught in Dallas, Texas. It is basically a student guidance program conducted for 20 minutes a day by each homeroom teacher.

"It gives them a chance to express their own ideas on a multitude of topics and gives them a voice in their own student government," said Miss Lay. The student body, she said, has always been passive in most activities. Another teacher said the program was helpful in guiding the teen-agers in the choice of student leaders, showing as much favor to intellect and leadership as to the brawn of athletic heroes. The students also hear speakers from business and the professions in an attempt to relate school work to the outside world.

Part of the program, Miss Lay concedes, should be involvement of the students in cultural events. A few field trips are possible, "but the hard thing is to get people of this sort to come in here," she said. "We're so isolated. These [disadvantaged] students are just unaware. They have never been anywhere. They lack curiosity. They have never been stimulated. A few in the upper levels of the classes are go-getters, but most are not. They have to be prodded."

There are many obstacles to making even the most routine sortie to find stimulus in the outside world. "We would like to take some of the students to a restaurant, but there is no money available. And not

all of the restaurants in this area are integrated," said Mrs. Holloway. Not even the senior trip, a major prestige event of the year, can be counted on as an experience for many students at Wewahitchka High School. Of the 42 seniors this year, only 27 could afford the jaunt to Washington in March.

Another effort isn't really a "program"; it is simply one teacher doing her best in spare time. Mrs. Carol Sue Lister, mathematics teacher and part-time guidance counselor, began in March an attempt to set up a clearinghouse for part-time jobs for students, especially work for students from poor families. It isn't educational, but it will meet a serious need. Other teachers, area businesses and residents are co-operating.

"The boys need and want work to do, but a lot of them, especially the colored children, won't go and ask," said Mrs. Lister. There are few jobs available, but she rounded up 20 openings in the first week of her search—a good start toward aiding 60 students who asked the school to help them find work.

To most of the poor in and around Wewahitchka, work—or a lack of it—is a more practical concern than education. The economy of the area is a powerful in-

fluence that hangs over education and everything else like the heavy sweet stench of smoke from the pulp mills in Port St. Joe and nearby Panama City.

Gulf County and most of the area surrounding it is dominated by the paper industry which owns nearly all the land—tens of thousands of acres planted in pine trees to keep the pulp mills running. While Panama City and smaller towns are now thriving on a growing tourist business boomed by miles of remarkably white Gulf of Mexico beach, the inland areas have their own version of the tourist trade with fishing camps and hunting grounds. But the waters of Dead Lakes, teeming with game fish a few miles north of Wewahitchka, are no match for the Gulf beaches teeming with high-spending teen-agers and other visitors. Big Tyndall Air Force Base near Panama City offers many jobs, but to most people of Wewahitchka it might as well be 500 miles away. Wewahitchka's only "industry" is a garment plant with a dozen or so employes.

"About all many of our kids know is fish grunting (catching worms for bait) and pulpwooding," said David Bidwell, assistant principal who also teaches mathematics. But this view is in contrast to one of the school's successes in spite of local conditions. In 1961-62, 35 per cent of its graduating seniors—seven out of 20—entered college. Last year it was 55 per cent, 22 of 40, including three of five Negro seniors. The state average is 45.5 per cent. The average for schools the same size as Wewahitchka is 28.5 per cent.

But this fact does little to change the grimmer fact of the limited economy of the area. Many residents are on welfare. Those employed in the paper mills are often out of work as the industry gears down to meet the pace of demand. The median family income is 15 per cent below the state figure. The average Gulf Countian has only 7.5 years in school while the state average is 10.9 years. While the county is expected to show 1 per cent growth in population in the next five years, the statewide growth is predicted at 20 per cent.

Few graduates of Wewahitchka High who break out of the cycle of the paper-industry economy stay in the county. Among those who do are the teachers. Although the beginning teacher's salary, \$4,620 for a new teacher with a bachelor's degree, is far from wealth, the teachers are considered among the "upper level" socially and economically. Since most of the land is reserved for the paper industry, not even farming is an outlet for residents, although some cultivate a few crops and keep beehives as a sideline.

Meanwhile, the school has focused its attention on two weapons against poverty—desegregation and reading and writing, the "communication skills."

Rouse, the persevering Negro teacher, thinks the benefits he expects from desegregation "may take three to five years." Teaching the many disadvantaged white and Negro children how to profit from use of the English language to improve their environment and themselves may take longer.

But it might come sooner. Things are happening at Wewahitchka High School.

Students enter one-room frame building for home-economics class.

