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Schools Chief

Wilson Riles: He's Come Long Way

By Sigrid Bathen
Bee Staff Writer

Wilson Riles and his wife of 40 years, Mary Louise, live today in the same South Land Park house they bought 22 years ago from an "individual seller," which in this case was 1959 real estate jargon for a white person willing to sell a house to a black person.

"A few 'for sale' signs went up around the neighborhood when we moved in," Louise Riles recalls with her enigmatic smile.

The property values in the Riles' comfortable neighborhood have since gone up considerably.

The house, like its owners, is unpretentious. It's extraordinarily neat and clean, with pale green walls in the living room, a baby grand piano in a corner. Who plays? Nobody, really, Wilson says. Oh, come on, she says, brushing his hand on the couch in the rare manner of married couples who still, after 40 years, touch often.

Wilson Riles — who 30 years ago was "Dr. Rhythm" (the "educated D.J.") on a popular Flagstaff, Ariz., radio show (he also was teaching in a black school, full time), who was told in Los Angeles by Chet Huntley that TV was coming and there was no chance for a black man, albeit a black man of imposing presence and a consummate broadcast voice, in TV news — plays the baby grand.

"Actually," he corrects, "I play at it."

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It is 7 p.m. on a Monday, and Riles is home early, for an interview — one of several conducted for this article.

Throughout the interviews he smiles often, ponders deeply, answers

Bee photo by Frank Stork

Wilson Riles and wife, Mary Louise, relax at home.

carefully. Nearly 64, always with a schedule of 12- and 16-hour days, he rarely appears tired.

There is, however, a certain quality of caution now, especially around reporters, as he prepares for his fourth campaign for state superintendent of public instruction. He prepares early because, although the 1982 primary is nearly a year away, it will be, by all accounts, a rough campaign.

"He has always kept some things to himself," says Vic Biondi, the former Sacramento television newsman who has been Riles press secretary for six years. "It may come out of his early years, when he had to fend for himself. There are a few cards he keeps close to his chest.

"Riles and the Department of Education have been constantly under attack from one quarter or another, and some of the attacks have been really vicious and without foundation.

"Then there have been the politically motivated leaks to the press about old problems or partially completed audits, which can be interpreted in a variety of ways.

"As a man of integrity, Wilson tends to take the attacks and innuendo personally. It bothers him terribly that people might think he could do the things he is accused of doing. There is this constant innuendo that somehow Wilson is responsible for all the ills of public education, that he himself is somehow corrupt.

"Nothing could be further from the truth."

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November 1980: Widely circulated news accounts report that California stands to lose $79 million in federal funds for special education. A critical federal report says California education officials illegally segregate handicapped children by race in state schools. State officials say the federal review team that inspected California's program did not write the critical report and that team members disagreed with its findings. California, which Riles says has one of the best special education programs in the country, did not lose the $79 million. Riles' aides note that little publicity was given to that fact.

December 1980: State Finance Director Mary Ann Graves issues a memorandum, leaked to the press, which is highly critical of Education Department accounting practices. Riles has not yet decided whether he will run for the U.S. Senate seat of S.I. Hayakawa, a seat believed by many political observers to interest Gov. Brown. Although Graves' office denies any political implications, there are suggestions in the Legislature and the Riles' camp that Brown forces were responsible for the memo and for the press leaks.

Although the memo draws big headlines, Riles aides note little publicity is given to the fact that figures cited in the memo were incorrect — an error admitted by Graves. Today, Finance Department administrator Stan Stancell, who oversees education funds, says the Department of Education is "making progress" in improving its accounting practices.

Finance Department questions about education funding, which is about one-third of the state budget (nearly one-half if higher education is included), spoke to accounting practices, not corrupt management. When the Graves memo made big headlines, Stancell said, "we were as surprised as Wilson."

New Year's Eve, 1980: State Sen. John Doolittle, R-Sacramento, releases a statement alleging "undocumented expenditures" exceeding $20 million in the Department of Education. He later admits the information was inaccurate, but he does not issue a retraction. "I wasn't aware a retraction was needed," said Doolittle aide Rick Stevenson.

March 1981: The California Commission on California State Government Organization and Economy (the Little Hoover Commission) announces it will study the Department of Education and its relationship to local school districts.

May 1981: Riles holds a press conference to accuse "a small group of right-wing radical legislators," led by Doolittle and Sen. H.L. Richardson, R-Arcadia, of attempting to take over public education by discrediting Riles and running Los Angeles school board member Richard Ferraro against him next year.

The legislators then held their own press conference attacking Riles' programs. State education officials said much of the information provided was old or based on audit documents open to various interpretations. Nonetheless, Richardson aide Mike Carrington insisted the information showed a pattern of neglect and mismanagement within the department.

The Richardson-Doolittle allegations have been turned over to the state auditor-general's office, where the staff is assisting the Little Hoover Commission in a review of California education.

Kurt Sjoberg, chief deputy auditor-general, said previous reviews of education department programs have indicated a need for "administrative improvements," but "no instances of malicious, knowing misuse of funds or mismanagement." He said the number of auditor-general reviews of education — 10 in the past 18 months — is not unusual and "just about mirrored the department's portion of the state budget."

Far from being a review prompted by overt mismanagement, Sjoberg said the auditor-general/Little Hoover Commission study — expected by August — will be "informational" and intended to provide some guidance to local and state education leadership in the post- Proposition 13 crunch.

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"It was," Greg Lipscomb wrote in 1973, "every bit as bitter in the beginning as it is sweet today."

A former San Francisco Chronicle reporter and also an attorney, Lipscomb was one of the early converts to the Riles cause. One day in 1970, he simply up and quit his reporting job and joined the Riles campaign against Max Rafferty. After the election, he became one of Riles' top aides.

Still a writer at heart, Lipscomb started a book about Riles, completing 74 pages before he had to drop the project to take a lawyer's job.

You read a lot — and hear it in Riles' speeches — about his humble beginnings as a backwoods Louisiana boy, an orphan at 11, who sought — and got — an education against enormous odds, who became the first black state schools superintendent anywhere in America, the first black elected state official in California history.

Nearly always, the backwoods references have an almost mawkish

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ring to them. And they always are the same, as if the reporters took them from the same tired press release. Lipscomb's unpublished piece gives new substance to the old stories.

"Elizabeth, Louisiana, sits in a clump of a flat pine forest, hot as a sauna in the summer and wet and bone-chilling cold in the winter," Lipscomb began. "In those days, just before the 1920s, the streets were dust and the houses were rude three-room structures of unpainted wood. There was one store and a movie house and, until Prohibition, a bar that served the town population of 2,000. Half of the residents were black and half were white."

Camanza Riles, for that was Wil-

Bee photo by Owen Brewer

Wilson Riles meets kindergarten pupils at Vallecito School in Lafayette on one of regular visits to classrooms, a favorite activity.

son's birth name, was the son of Wilson and Susie Anna Riles. His father chose the name for its sound of power. Riles never liked it, and as a young man took his father's name.

A "late-in-life" child, young Camanza was adored, preened, taken everywhere by his mother, who died when he was 9. His memories of her are acutely clear more than a half-century later.

When he talks about his mother's death, the loquacious, ingratiating public Riles is gone. In its place, a private Riles leans back, unsmiling, on his green-and-white living room couch.

"I found it very difficult to accept her death," he says slowly. "I went through nightmares, great depression. After two or three years of that, it suddenly occurred to me that nothing else that could happen in my life could be worse."

Riles' father worked long, arduous hours in a turpentine camp. He died when Camanza was 11.

"When he was around, he was a wonderful companion," Riles recalls today. "I always felt wanted and loved by my parents, and that is so very important."

The young Riles was taken in by friends of the family. He attended Elizabeth Colored Elementary School, where the principal, F. Paul Augustine, believed that education was the salvation for black people in America. His tiny school produced many teachers, a New York doctor, a playwright, an Arizona state senator and a California state school superintendent.

There was no high school in Elizabeth, so the extended black family at the African Methodist Episcopal Church, where Susie Anna Riles had been a tireless volunteer, raised $40 for Camanza to buy a suit and a bus ticket to New Orleans.

In New Orleans, Riles attended a black high school and lived with an elderly man in a one-room shack between an alley and train tracks — a shack with no paint, plumbing or address. Riles found a job delivering milk, for $2.50 per week plus a quart of milk.

After high school, Riles moved with his foster family to Flagstaff, Ariz., where he became the only black student at Arizona State Teachers College, now Northern Arizona State University.

"Up to then, I didn't think white people had any problems whatsoever," Riles recalls wryly. "I thought they spent all their time hating me. When I got acquainted with some of them, I found they were more concerned with their own problems than with me."

He earned his way by taking food trays to sick students in the dorms, and by working at other jobs with a small stipend from the New Deal's National Youth Administration.

"I want to tell you I *worked* for that $15 a month," Riles told a recent parents meeting in Concord, his voice rising. "I want to tell you I have paid back the government 1,000 and 2,000 times in taxes."

Then: "Sorry to get worked up like that." To which the audience, clearly impressed by his powerful presence as a public speaker, responded with loud applause.

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Riles' first teaching job was in a one-room black school in Pistol Creek, Ariz., with 12 students who had run off the previous three teachers. He was firm about discipline, insistent that they learn the value of education.

Several in turn became teachers and one a lieutenant colonel in the Air Force.

After Pistol Creek, Riles became principal of a three-teacher school in McNary, Ariz. Louise was one of the teachers.

More outspoken, less tolerant of bigotry than her husband, Louise Riles is very often credited with influencing her more staid and steadfast husband to, as he puts it, "take risks." A dedicated mediator, Riles would rather talk out a dispute, resolve it through dialogue, than engage in direct confrontation — a methodology he has used repeatedly to defuse local disputes or ease controversial schools legislation through a balky Legislature.

"There have been many occasions when it would have been wise politically, for Wilson to stay out of a particular controversy at the local level," says deputy superintendent Davis Campbell. "But he has a high sense of principle, and he believes one important role of the superintendent is to mediate disputes."

Riles' feeling for mediation comes in large measure out of his pre- education department days as southwest regional secretary for the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR), a Quaker organization that worked with religious leaders and community groups for non-violent social change.

Riles had come to the attention of FOR leadership when, as head of the all-black Dunbar School in Flagstaff after World War II, he resurrected a defunct chapter of the NAACP that successfully desegregated local movie theaters. In 1952, he was a leader in the ultimately successful efforts to desegregate Arizona's schools.

Riles' FOR experience, based in Los Angeles, took him throughout the Southwest and brought him to the attention of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, who offered him a top post in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. Riles declined.

Instead, he took a California civil service test and placed among the top three contenders (the only black to do so). In 1958, he became the first black consultant — the entry-level professional position in the state Department of Education — when he was hired by then-Superintendent Roy Simpson.

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Riles' first education department job was to encourage the hiring of minority teachers in California schools, and to improve the representation of minorities in the department.

In 1961, Simpson announced his retirement after 16 years as state schools chief.

If Riles wins his fourth term next

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Bee photo by Owen Brewer

Marion Joseph is Riles' top aide.

Riles

year, he will rival Simpson's previously unchallenged record of time served as state superintendent. And, as Riles girds for the toughest political battle of his charmed public career, he looks back — with an odd sense of irony — to the experience of the 1960s, and to Max Rafferty.

Americans were dissatisfied with their schools in the 1960s. In the post-Sputnik era, they were concerned that American school children were not receiving adequate training in the so-called "hard sciences." There was an active "back- to-basics" movement and intense concern over "why Johnny can't read."

Rafferty, the then politically obscure superintendent of the Needles school district in Southern California, won over a dozen others on a platform replete with demagoguery, simplistic solutions to the complex problems of education and a flat-out appeal to the ultraconservative mood that was sweeping the country.

Rafferty politicized a previously non-political, certainly apolitical, office. "He never administered anything," said former Visalia schools superintendent H. Doug Lovik, a leader in statewide school administration groups. "Rafferty left a terrible void."

The Legislature, under Republican Gov. Ronald Reagan, began to strip Rafferty's department of some of its programs, including the community colleges. Many department professionals took other jobs. Riles, then director of compensatory education, was one of the few top administrators to stay.

"One after another left, and Max began to put in screwballs," Riles recalls. "I often said I had to quit, I can't go on any longer. But everyone had quit and that hadn't solved anything.

"Someone had to run against him, and I was approached. I thought, 'this is impossible.' No black man would ever be elected."

But he was, winning 54 percent of the vote in the general election. He has been re-elected twice, polishing off his opponents in the primaries. In 1974 he received 64 percent of the vote, but in 1978 the vote share slipped to 52 percent.

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Riles is happiest when he is in schools, talking to kids, meeting with teachers, administrators and parents. His previous campaigns always have centered on local people, on mobilizing parent support in local schools. After speeches, even when he isn't campaigning, he often stays until the last straggler has left the auditorium.

Hovering nearby, always, is Randy Trasvina, the state police officer assigned to protect Riles, who was on the SLA's "hit list" after Oakland schools chief Marcus Foster was gunned down in 1974.

Trasvina, who has been with Riles for five years, is spare with words. At a recent dinner meeting of a parents group in Concord, he was asked if Riles always spent so much time with local school people. Surely the motivation could not be votes, not at 10 p.m. when the last of the stragglers is hanging on, enjoying a personal audience with the chief state schools officer, complaining to him about this or that.

Oblivious to his exhausted staff, bored reporters, and the fact he was entering the 15th hour of his workday, Riles listened and nodded, absorbed in the words of the citizenry.

"He really does enjoy this sort of thing," Trasvina mused. "I think he genuinely cares about what they have to say."