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William Henry Chafe Oral History Collection

INTERVIEWEE: Randolph Blackwell

INTERVIEWER: William Chafe

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WILLIAM CHAFE: —pick up on some of the things you and Sarah Boyd talked about yesterday and that we talked about in Atlanta. I guess the first question that I'm interested in—that I'd like to ask you is, how did it happen that you became very active in really informing that the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] council in 1943?

RANDOLPH BLACKWELL: Well, you understand that I'm the son of a Garveyite.

WC: Uh-huh.

RB: Mr. [Marcus] Garvey was deported about 1927, I guess. He operated after 1927 from Kingston, Jamaica, so that many of the publications of the Universal [Negro] Improvement Association came into this country. And one on my childhood experiences was selling those publications. So that from almost at the point at which I can walk, you know, and talk, I was involved in something related to social change. The further we got away from 1927, the more the need developed to find another umbrella. My father—who had not particularly liked [W.E.B.] DuBois up to this point, or NAA[CP] up to this point—having been highly influenced by the Garvey movement, then began to ease in his attitude towards this. And by 1938 or '37 or '38 was then beginning to feel that that which he couldn't do through the Garvey movement could possibly be done by John Dunne through the NAA. So that began to become the umbrella through which he would work, so that [by] 1943 I was pretty thoroughly indoctrinated, I guess you'd say, into NAA camp, and then came in contact with Ella Baker, who was field secretary for NAA.

WC: Did she come that same year that you formed the—

RB: I'm not sure. I'm not sure, but around that time.

WC: Yeah.

RB: But as the question was raised why there isn't a youth council, and what can we do at our age, then it was very logical that the next thing would be less formal.

WC: Who raised that question? Did you raise it yourself? Did members in the adult NAA raise it?

RB: No, I'm almost certain that it came out of a youth group, and I'm not sure whether I raised it specifically or not.

WC: So it was not formed around any particular issue, but rather a general sense of wanting to do something—

RB: Yeah.

WC: —and there being a vacuum there which you could feel. Did you get any resistance to the idea of forming a [NAACP] Youth Council?

RB: No.

WC: Among your peer group or among the parents of your peer group?

RB: No, no.

WC: Could you describe what the general status of the NAA was in Greensboro at that time—the older, the adult—

RB: It was a rapidly developing, growing organization. We were in the war [WWII] at the time. Much of the education that had been a part of NAA when it was a much smaller organization was beginning to kind of stalemate because [of] emphasis, to a very great extent, on the war. But memberships in the association were constantly growing—kind of middle-class in its leadership, but very strong low income under—and undergirded by low-income leadership that gave a lot of time and a lot of energy to the building of the organization.

WC: Who were some of the people who were members, being most active at that point in the forties?

RB: Man by the name of T. D. Wooten. You ever heard that name?

WC: No.

RB: Ms. [Nell] Coley, Vance Chavis, Reverend Poston[?].

WC: Which church was he from?

RB: I don't know. I get the impression it was one of the smaller churches.

WC: Yeah.

RB: Reverend [Julius] Douglas.

WC: To be a member of the NAACP, was that to be pretty far—was that to be really taking a chance in Greensboro at that time, in terms of your economic position, your job, your—

RB: If you're in public education, I think there were some risks involved. But I tend to think that the risks were exaggerated.

WC: Did you feel that the youth council was looked up to by, let's say, the students at Dudley High, or was there a real separation between your group, let's say, and the general student body?

RB: Well, there's no separation, and yet there was no great prestige involved because it's not a large organization—maybe thirty or forty students at the most.

WC: Did they have anything in common?

RB: Not that I think off.

WC: I know that you said yesterday that they came from really all over the city; they weren't necessarily your friends—not all of the city, but all—you know, not from the same—

RB: I don't think of anything that they had in common. And most of them I do not see active in anything social change wise after their Dudley High experience.

WC: Did you meet at the school? Was that your meeting place?

RB: We could have met at the school. They probably did hold some meetings at the school, but I think we did more meeting off campus, away from school, in churches.

WC: How did someone like Mr. [John] Tarpley [superintendent of Negro schools] feel about this effort? Did he ever express a feeling about?

RB: I think it was more his posture to ignore its existence rather than having to express an opinion that might be negative. Inwardly, I'm satisfied that he would have favored it.

WC: Could you just say what you think his situation was—his role was during this period?

RB: You'll have to be a little bit more specific.

WC: Well, I'm wondering really how he was seen by the black community in terms of his relationship to the white community. Was—for example, would Vance Chavis view [Tarpley?] as perhaps too much as an accomodationist?

RB: No. I think Vance Chavis was, in a funny sort of way, an accomodationist himself. But he and Mr. Tarpley—you see, I have to rely on the notion that there was yearning in Vance Chavis and in Mr. Tarpley for the same thing, except strategically more—more that Vance Chavis would come forward and Tarpley wouldn't.

WC: Could I go back to the whole question of what it was like at Dudley at that point? Did the spirit, let's say, or the atmosphere among the student body—was there much discussion of, let's say, the issues which the NAA would be involved in, in school?

RB: Very little. The discussion primarily involving the white community in the school usually centered around black kids beating up—white kids beating up black kids in the course of getting to and from school. But the issues were very fuzzy, and in many instances were—

WC: You mentioned before how important in your life Nell Coley and Vance Chavis were. Could you say in what ways they were? How did they affect you?

RB: Well, only in the sense that they were two public educators that were prepared to be publicly identified with NAA. Mrs. [N.L.?] Gregg, who's in one of the elementary schools, publicly identified. But aside from those three, you didn't have any others. And I think the reason why you didn't have any others was because of some notion that if—and

I'm not sure that it was anything but a notion—that if we carried an NAA card you'd be fired. I don't know of any instances [in] which somebody lost their job for having an NAA card, but I don't know of any substantial number of people that had NAA cards.

WC: Did Chavis and Ms. Coley transmit this kind of message in the classroom? In other words, did the classroom behavior also distinguish them from the other teachers?

RB: No, they were good teachers and they did their job as teachers. But I think their NAA involvement only—if you learn anything from the NAA involvement, you learned as a result of seeing them functioning out of school. There wasn't any political content in the teaching of English or the teaching of physics, which were the courses that they taught. But I don't recall that they tried to influence thinking.

WC: Waldo [E.] Martin [Jr.] was telling me last night that Ms. Coley had been an inspiration, too, because of the way she challenged him, in a way in which he said his other teachers really hadn't challenged him, to just call out the best that was in him and to set such a high standard that he was always trying to prove himself. I was wondering that they came across in that way as being different from—

RB: Well, I don't know that my feelings are the same as Waldo's. I studied under both of them, but Dudley had a very good faculty. And I can say that not as one emotionally involved in it. Looking back over twenty years and evaluating that faculty with some of the faculties that I've seen in the schools now, I know that the quality of instruction and the commitment of the teachers was much greater than what I see now. I'm always giving my daughter a fit because what they do in their music department wouldn't have been tolerated as anything called performance in my high school, you know.

WC: Could I ask you about—you mentioned [unclear] that your parents had been, on a political basis, very active in that they had almost always supported the black candidates, while there were some other people in the community who would have bargained off their support for white candidates. Can you give an instance in that?

RB: Well, I think probably the first man that I remember offering for public office was a Reverend R[obert] C. Sharp. And Sharp must have run for the [Greensboro] City Council at least a half a dozen times [and] never won. My family—it was just kind of understood that we were going to do whatever we could to support his candidacy and that that was who we wanted to see elected. Now, candidates always sought out and found black people in the community that they could hire to be campaign workers for them. We were never available for that kind of hire.

WC: Who were some of those who were?

RB: Reverend Green[?], who is now dead, used to be a prime mover in that kind of thing. Russell, L.A. Russell used to be one such person. Lillian Cummings in Warnersville used to be one such person. And these people were not looked upon as being evil; they were up to my college days. Now we painted them as evil, and we taught the community that they were evil as college kids, and we attacked them as evil, as college kids. But before our college days, they were the people who came around to help you with your ballot, and you found that you needed help with the ballot.

Now, I had also helped them because they've got money. [I] got paid for helping people to vote the right way. But given a string of candidates and I don't have time to know what these various candidates are, I'll just consult the ward leader. Of course, it wasn't ward leader in the formalized sense, but I just consult this person and this person will come for me in a car and take me to the poll and bring me back. And I want to vote, so that's the way that they function. And they were not regarded as evil people. But when I was a sophomore in college, it was very obvious that that pattern had to be broken up, and we set about the task of breaking it up.

WC: How did you do that?

RB: Well, in some instances we supported candidates with a kind of vigor that would make it impossible for you to claim to be interested in the black community and not be in support of this particular candidate. There was one thing I remember. In the later days breaking up that pattern, which must have been about 1947, we started going to all of the meetings, because it was the practice of white candidates to come to rallies in the black community and make a speech and then leave. And we would ask them—and another way of breaking it up was to ask all sorts of embarrassing questions to the candidates, which used to infuriate the people that put together the meetings because the candidates did not want to be subjected to embarrassing questions. And it was kind of understood that, you know, you don't—"I'm not paying you to set up a trap for me." So that we would always show up and ask the questions and rabble-rouse, in a sense. And this was our way of kind of exposing the whole mechanism of being a hired person for this. And some instances—I remember Rev. Green gave a kind of beer party for a candidate, and there were about fifteen of us and we crowded out the beer party. And girls would pass by with cookies, and we'd off handfuls.

WC: [laughs]

RB: And they'd pass the cigarettes, and instead of taking one, we'd grab off a handful. And we were just wrecking things with our youthful way of doing things, just wrecking

things. And then when the candidate finished his speech, one of us said, “We want to ask you some questions.”

And Rev. Green jumped to his feet and said, “They’re to be no questions asked here. And if you don’t get out of here, I’ll bust you in your mouth.”

WC: How did someone like Dr. [William] Hampton respond to that kind of tactic? What really was his position in this whole issue?

RB: William Hampton probably emerged as the first candidate that could attract white support. He had never been identified with anything social action wise in the black community prior to his running. F. A. Mayfield had run for city council and had dared to trust his campaign in the hands to this group of college kids. We had done very extensive voter registration. It was the first time in the city that we had had night registration. And we had chosen the [voter] registrars into coming out into the black community to register citizens. And I’m sure that these registrars thought that there’d be just a half a dozen people show up, and they’d register those half a dozen and go back.

WC: Yeah.

RB: But presenting it to the registrars in that way, we were able to get them to come out and set up [unclear] registering. But we had also hired a sound truck. And soon as we got this guy seated to register, we began to boom the community, “Street bus! Street bus! Come out and register. The registrar’s out. He can do it tonight. It’ll take no time.” We kept lines two and three blocks long around that place registering people. Well, it was done on the threshold of F. A. Mayfield’s [unclear]. You know, the voting balloting on Mayfield, so that Mayfield didn’t win. But it was that voter registration excitement that set the stage for Hampton’s election, which occurred the next year.

There were two candidates. At one point we ran a local bar/pool room/barber shop guy for city council, a man by the name of Brody McCauley, who had a lot of friends, street corner friends. Brody was not middle-class black. Brody was kind of shady, questionable, but never convicted or guilty of anything. But he was close enough to that crowd. He ran the pool room. He ran he beer hall. He ran the barber shop. There was some kind of cloud over him, but nothing had ever had any conflict with the law. We—this was this group of college kids again—saw, in the running of Brody, an opportunity to involve people that had not been traditionally thought of as voting citizens. So that by running him we were able to pull the guys out of the pool room and the bars and get them registered. We never did—well, I guess we did kind of think that Brody might win. But in terms of image, at that point, with this notion that the right to occupy public office belongs to certain kinds of folk, we ran afoul of the system and we were criticized for it, but we were satisfied in our own minds that this was what needed to be done. And we

persuaded Brody to offer himself, and I think he was terribly uncomfortable after we had talked him into it, but he couldn't get out of it. We had paid his filing fee and got him in there and we had literature printed and distributed so that he was locked in, having lent himself, and went all the way through the race. We never were able to get him to campaign in any form. He never made a public speech the whole time. He never did anything, other than lend his name.

WC: And Hampton was running at the same time?

RB: No. You see, there are two elections that set the stage for—or it's a mistake to assume that Hampton just got elected. There were two elections that were significant in setting the stage for that: Brody McCauley, in which we went after the street corner crowd, low-income street corner crowd, and then F. A. Mayfield, who was a professor at A&T—or we went after another crowd getting these two in voter registration drives. By running them, then it was pretty—we were ready then to run a candidate that would be acceptable to all of these various groups. And William Hampton was—came—

WC: How did he get chosen?

RB: I believe he was chosen in a community meeting. I left Greensboro about four months. I left prior to his running. Oh, another thing, I had run for the state legislature of that period. And all of this worked at increasing political awareness and increased registration. So by the time that Hampton ran, there had been a kind of political activity focusing on blacks. You follow me?

RB: Right.

WC: That had not taken place before. Now, my campaign was very alive, issue hard-hitting campaign, so that there was a kind of political education that had come out of that experience for the community. It was political education that had come out of Mayfield for the community and out of Brody for the community, and we were ready then to elect Hampton.

WC: Would you call Hampton a compromise candidate—someone, in effect, who was able to bridge whatever—

RB: I would think so.

WC: You don't know anything about how his name was perhaps suggested as this kind of—

RB: I don't recall how that happened. But I would guess that it occurred in a small meeting of the NAA.

WC: I know you weren't in Greensboro at that time. What had been your general impression of his term in office, in terms of representing the black community in Greensboro and speaking to its demands and its needs?

RB: I don't—I was not there, but I—there were issues to be raised. But Hampton was not the kind of man that would [have] the political astuteness to look at his own community and say that this is the way it is because of the city council and I must champion the change. I would think it was business as usual for William Hampton.

WC: Could I go back a second to the—to your experience at A&T? Let me just preface by saying that a long conversation that I had with John Marshall Stevenson [now Kilimanjaro] and he had very negative things to say about the administration of A&T during the fifties, and about attitude which he saw as being transmitted there of keeping things quiet and directing people away from any kind of activism. And I wondered how that compared with your experience, whether you would have had a different kind of experience.

RB: A&T, like most land grant colleges, was in the hands of the state legislature. There was some real fear that always—that the legislature might penalize the institution for its identification of things radical. So that you—A&T was traditionally a school—the administration was traditionally viewed as being an administration that played a subservient, compromising role where the state legislature was concerned. And naturally this would mean that A&T would quite likely want to stand aside any identification administrative-wise with anything. However, I know of my own knowledge that there was a kind of yearning inside the leadership of that school for the same kinds of things that would have been called publicly radical.

I remember after that night that we had the voter registrars out in the community, Dean [Warmouth] Gibbs, who taught political science at A&T, came to me and he said he just wanted me to know that he approved of what had happened. And he came over and he said, "Mr. Blackwell, you really turned them out. You really turned them out." Now that's all he said. He didn't go into any discourse about what this meant and how glad it was—how glad he was or how strong, but I knew that I enjoyed his approval by that one statement. And, you know, that's a very careful way of keeping alive something that you thought was important, without running the risk of jeopardizing the school by openly identifying with it.

Another such instance: when I was studying at A&T, that was the time that I ran for the legislature. And I knew that in a way I was jeopardizing the college. I felt that the

college really couldn't afford to have me around because I ran against four of the richest men in the state, and I ran the kind of campaign where I was really tearing them to pieces. I'd do crazy things. It was a college group that sponsored my candidacy and then insisted on street corner campaigning. And in the course of a street corner speech, I would say things like, "Mr. Combs' income last year was fifty-two, fifty-three million dollars after expenses. I frankly don't think that Mrs. Combs needs a million dollars a week to live off of, considering that you only get forty dollars a week." And, you know, that kind of rabble-rousing kind of campaign that was attracting a lot of attention on all sides, and of course to embarrass Mr. Combs.

And I believe Caesar Cone was on the trustee board at A&T at that time; I'm not sure. But anyway, certainly no black student had any business out there embarrassing Mr. Cone. And I just knew that at some point the administration would get the word to put an end to me and my foolishness. And one day I was standing there on the campus and [A&T president] Dr. [Ferdinand] Bluford was coming through the campus. And as he and a little crowd of maybe ten or fifteen people was standing around me, and I had posters on just about every tree on that campus, which of course was [violative of any being reasonable?] if I was trying to protect the school. And I knew that at some point the administration would deal with me on that. So I was standing there with about twenty or thirty students and Dr. Bluford passed along the sidewalk just by this group, and he—I didn't know that he knew me personally, but he knew that I was on the campus. I had not had any personal dealing with him, so he was not even supposed to be able to recognize me. But anyway, as he passed along he said, "Mr. Blackwell, would you come to my office? I want to talk with you." Well, as I walked to his office—and as I left the group it was kind of understood: "It's all over. This is it. It had to come at some point. At this point, when he comes back out of that office, he'll tell us he's been expelled."

And I went to his office to hear these words of expulsion. He got in the office and he sat down and he closed the door and he sat down behind his desk and he said to me, "If you need to use any auditoriums on this campus, go ahead and use them. Don't ask me can you, because if you do I'll have to say no. But if you use them without my permission, and the legislature wants to know why I'm tolerating this kind of thing, I can always answer I didn't know a thing in the world about it." And so the conference was over. I think there was a significance in the fact that Bluford was willing to go that far in trusting me that he could tell me what his strategy for survival was. And equally significant, of course, is the fact that he did have that kind of sense of dignity, so that you had a man that was very thoroughly discredited and constantly abused, but a man that also had some of the same yearnings of those of us that were out there raising hell. He had the responsibility of maintaining a college in the face of the kind of opposition that could come to bear, and at the same time trying to protect his own dignity in the process.

WC: That's a very [unclear] story, I think, especially in mind what happened in 1960 when Governor [Luther] Hodges came here and just [unclear] Bluford for not apologizing for the [unclear] to his Negro.

RB: Yeah.

WC: Bluford was simply for going to apologize. I guess subsequently he said something, but at the time—and I guess very shortly after he died. It's an interesting story. Were there—I would—what you said, really that on the faculty, too, you probably would have had support, but it would not have been overt support.

RB: It was not overt support, but it was the kind of—you could feel the admiration. I sat in classes I could have done anything I wanted to when I was at A&T College. I didn't have to go to class unless I wanted to. I didn't have to study unless I wanted to. But I studied all the time. I studied very hard and stayed way out front of class, because I didn't want to put teachers in that position. But there was a kind of quiet admiration for me and the—there's was a nut that taught in the social science department that thought that he was in good favor by attacking me and the other guys or the people that worked with me. And he thought that by doing that he would incur the favor of other staff people, only to discover that instead of doing that, he lost favor because he had improperly assessed their respect for us as students.

WC: Yeah. How about those other students that were with you there at A&T? Most of them, I assume, came from—may have come from the immediate area. Are any of them still—

RB: Marshall [Cosen?], who was probably my right hand man, is now one of the vice-presidents of A&T—

WC: Yeah.

RB: —or vice president. Let's see, Gertrude Lee, who was another of that group, is a supervisor in the Harlem Hospital Psychiatric [Department]. My sister is still there. She works in public education. But just about all of the people that were there are around doing something—I'm selling them one by one already.

WC: Thank you very much. I've greatly appreciate the time you took filling some of these gaps, and I look forward talking to you many times more.

[End of Interview]