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William Henry Chafe Oral History Collection

INTERVIEWEE: George Breathett

INTERVIEWER: William H. Chafe

DATE: 1974-1975

GEORGE BREATHETT: If you want to save your battery, I have kind of a portable extension that you can plug right in.

WILLIAM CHAFE: Well, I think this is okay. We'll probably just go on for half an hour or so before, or maybe less than that even. I'm interested in a number of things that you were saying here about, well—about, for example, the Eleanor Roosevelt controversy and the whole role of Bennett [College] in the community in the forties and thirties. I'm not sure how—well, Bennett, I take it, has always been a place where people came to give this kind of address.

GB: Yes, I think that the significance here is there was a feeling that one needed to broaden the horizons of the students as much as possible. This meant then bringing the distinguished speakers or lecturers, if you will, to the campus. They may be—some of these might have been considered radical, some were—of course, all were liberal, but all distinguished in their own rights. Now, getting back to the Eleanor Roosevelt thing, you will recall that with the NYA [National Youth Administration] [and] the other kinds of things that Eleanor Roosevelt had done with blacks, particularly with Mary McLeod Bethune, you see, many in the South did not look with favor upon her. And, of course, the campus was threatened when she came here to speak. This was during World War II. I wasn't here, of course. I'd only come to the college in the fifties, in '53. But these were the things that I know with regard to the history of the college.

WC: What was your—if I could ask you a personal question—what was your sense of—when you came here in '53, what was your sense of the community and of the state of race relations in Greensboro?

GB: I really had none. I'd never been in North Carolina before. I came from the University of Iowa, when I came here. But I always had been told that North Carolina was more liberal

than other Southern states. This perhaps went back to the Howard Odum school at the University of North Carolina. The distinguished sociologist had done all these studies, as far as the South was concerned. I also had the feeling—and I guess most [unclear]—if you go into a community town which is, you know, just running over, so to speak, with colleges and universities, there ought to be a different kind of tone. And I found this to be so, because people on the college and university faculty were interacting.

WC: They were—

GB: One with the acting, one with the other. Not as openly always as one wished, but we were doing it.

WC: What did this primarily—who did this primarily involve? People in your own field or—

GB: They really sort of cut across. We would say interesting people—interested people. And I mean by that people who were [phone rings] interested in having the same kinds of discussion of doing the same [phone rings] sorts of things that we were.

WC: This was the Interfaculty Forum?

GB: Interfaculty Forum, plus some other things that we did. Not all were successful. I will recall one year the Quakers were to have one of their little summer conferences here. And once many of the people who were coming from out of the city found that it was going to be on this campus, they didn't want to be here. So they had to move it. [unclear]

WC: Do you remember when that was?

GB: Now, I can do all these things date-wise, but I just have to pull things.

WC: Sometime in the fifties though, probably?

GB: Yes.

WC: Well, let me leap right ahead then into this whole question of the sit-ins. I've heard the comment that you made that Bennett students really were the—what's the word you used?

GB: Students and faculty were the ones who carried—

WC: Carried it, yeah.

GB: —the movement.

WC: I wonder if you'd elaborate on that a little bit.

GB: Well, as I said to you earlier, as a private institution not relying upon Southern philanthropy as such, we did not have the constraints that, let's say, the state institutions had or institutions that were—Now, we have two other private institutions, Guilford [College] and Greensboro College, but they were in essentially in and of and part and parcel of the region. We also had an interracial faculty, and we had a sort of faculty that, by its ongoing posture, was committed to this kind of thing. You see, the college, for examples, had always run student exchange programs with colleges like Mount Holyoke and Skidmore and Vassar and Sarah Lawrence and the like, which meant that we had these white faces on the campus all of the time. We got a lot of flack about that as well, or students being threatened, white students being threatened as well. But this was just sort of the way we moved. This is the way we felt. People felt a kind of commitment to this thing. And we felt that since we did not have the restrictions that some of the other institutions had, that we just had to do that.

WC: So there was an ambience sort of predisposition to that sort of thing.

GB: Yes, yes. I would [unclear].

WC: Now, [Bennett president] Dr. [Willa] Player, I guess, was someone who—was she—would you call her a leader in this tradition?

GB: I think her role was supportive.

WC: Supportive.

GB: Now, what I mean by supportive is this: she could have restricted faculty involvement. She could have attempted to restrict student involvement. She did neither. When the girls were jailed out at the old polio hospital, she went out there and moved among them to see how they were being treated. She went to the jails to check on the faculty members, particularly to find out what was happening to the white faculty members who were isolated from their black colleagues once they were jailed.

WC: Who were some of those people?

GB: Well, I guess the one who was most involved at that point was Elizabeth Laizner.

WC: How do you spell her last name?

GB: L-a-i-z-n-e-r, who was a professor of German, and, of course, who had left the Nazi period—left Austria during the Nazi period. Another one of our persons very involved, white faculty, Dr. Rose [Karfiol?], who was also a person who had left Hitler persecution in Germany. We had a lot of those kinds of people on the faculty, very competent, very well-trained, and who actually lived right here in the black community and who were all, you know, a little group of our own. I guess at that point we really didn't care about what some of those others thought, because we were people. And Rose Karfiol is now deceased. She was a professor of economics and political science. But she retired here and of course is now deceased, as I said. These were some of the whites.

Of course, we did have one incident—one episode, which you can trace down in the newspapers. But we had the Jeromes. And, of course, she [Alice] was a marvelous teacher, wasn't involved in anything. Once the whole protest began, they were finding all sorts of ways to discredit whites, of course. And they found out that he had been before the House Un-American Activities Committee. So they ran that in the paper for all of Greensboro.

WC: Yeah.

GB: Now, our feeling here at that time was this: we didn't give a damn whether she was a communist or he was a communist. We said, "You don't have to tell the newspapers anything. But this is a church-related institution. What do you say to your colleagues when you ask them to support you?" And, of course, they refused. They would not [unclear] anyone. So, you see, it's like if I'm the lawyer, tell me the truth. That's the only way I can defend you.

WC: And they finally retired or resigned—

GB: They left.

WC: They resigned under pressure, obviously?

GB: Yes.

WC: Who were some of the black faculty members who were arrested?

GB: Oh, there was John Hatchett, Jim Bush, Jim McMillan, among others; those names just kind of stick out. You see, when everybody's involved in something, you kind of remember the organizers of things, and the other names sort of float away.

WC: Of course, there had to be some people who were out of jail to coordinate and continue the movement while those others were in jail.

GB: Now, I don't want to give you the impression now that the other institutions did nothing. I do want to set the record straight in saying that admirable it was for the young men who sat. But then equally admirable was the way these women over here picked up the gauntlet.

WC: And these were—

GB: And that's the story of the black woman. She's been in the forefront, you see.

WC: And was this the kind of thing which the women students and the faculty members at Bennett initiated on their own? In other words, did they decide to do this on their own?

GB: Originally, there was a group effort. A&T students, Bennett students were [unclear]. And I will not say—I must make the record clear, too, that there were A&T students involved. But the real—perfection is not a good word—but you've got a real faculty-student thrust of a sustaining nature was here. There were many fine people at A&T like John Marshall Stevenson [now Kilimanjaro] and the like who were out there. But you didn't have many to put your fingers on in that [bag?]

WC: Neither was there the same combined faculty-student support over at A&T.

GB: No, not to my knowledge.

WC: And this was in 1963, is that not true?

GB: Somewhere around there.

WC: The '63 movement as opposed to the '60 movement—not that there weren't Bennett students there then, too, but the '63—

GB: But there were Bennett students there from the very beginning.

WC: Yes, right.

GB: From the very, very beginning. For example, as you will find in any large black environment, there are many students who could decide their race. And I think one of the more humorous aspects [is me and these students?] would go to the movie theater and buy tickets and then walk out and hand them to their colleagues, or go to the S&W [Cafeteria] and things of that sort. Of course, it shows the stupidity of racial classifications [unclear].

WC: Now, you kind of—there wasn't really much pressure from parents or from the administration, obviously, against these demonstrations?

GB: No. What we said was this: number one, if you are college students and you have been trained to this point, there should be something in the way that you would do it that would distinguish you from the way the man in the street would do it. You see, you had leadership development. So if you're going in—we even went on to say, "If you're going to be in a demonstration, this is not a day for the dungarees. You're going to dress like a professional woman, you see, and there will be no basis for anybody to question your dignity."

WC: And you think the fact that these were women who'd had a great deal to do with not only [unclear] but the way in which they—

GB: No doubt about it.

WC: —they were treated.

GB: If you look back—I can check *Mademoiselle* magazine; during that period there was a write up about this and Bennett—the involvement of Bennett. In fact, I was quoted in that same article. I think it does. Let's look at yourself. You—I'm not good at striking anyone, but I'm sure you can't strike a woman in the same way you strike a man, or your feeling about it is different. I don't care what kind of a woman that is, what her color is, anything else.

WC: Has it been your experience, since you've been in Greensboro, that there's a difference between women and men cross-racial-wise?

GB: What do you mean by that?

WC: Well, that women are more likely to be supportive, to be involved in activities of a generally liberal kind than the men are?

GB: Well, that goes back to what I said earlier. The struggle for women's rights and the struggle for general civil rights have almost gone hand in hand.

WC: Have you been involved at all or people you know in YWCA [Young Women's Christian Association] activities?

GB: Very little, very little at all. I have been very active in my own church activity and the kinds of things we try to do in the Catholic church. But these are—as far as YWCA or even YMCA or what you, no.

WC: Is Monsignor [Hugh] Dolan still in the area?

GB: Yes.

WC: He is?

GB: He's at Saint Pius [X Catholic Church].

WC: And were you involved closely with him during these—

GB: I've always known well. We've always had a very close association.

WC: I've been rather impressed by the number of times in which his name appears significantly in the interracial activities.

GB: Yes, I think he's more of a theoretician, however.

WC: He is?

GB: Yeah.

WC: Wasn't there an episode at Notre Dame High School at some point—do you recall that—in the fifties, involving desegregation of the high school?

GB: An incident of any kind? No incident I can think of.

WC: No, not an incident, a controversy.

GB: Well, I think we had throughout whether we should or shouldn't have the high school, that's number one. I think that we of the black Catholic community were incensed when the bishop put out an announcement in the newspapers that said that the high school would be open to black Catholics—all others and black Catholics. We resented that because that was a lie. And there were nun—there were black nun Catholics there at that very moment, probably equal to the Catholic blacks, you see. And we just simply felt that he wasn't taking a stand at that point. It was not necessary to make that kind of apologetic.

WC: Was Dr. [Edwin] Edmonds—did you know him?

GB: I knew him very well. Ed and I were very close friends. He was a man who rejuvenated the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] in this town and was active in all the civil rights activities as long as he was here—lived right there on the corner, 700 Gorrell Street. He is now in New Haven, Connecticut, pastor of Dixwell Avenue Congregational Church.

WC: Dixwell Avenue.

GB: I think they just call it Dixwell now since they relocated, Dixwell Congregational Church.

WC: I'm going to try to see him on Thanksgiving on my way up there. I didn't know if he was—what the name of the church was, though. Thank you for telling me that. When you say rejuvenated, that implies it was in a relative stagnant state.

GB: Okay. He handled the NAACP right out of the office, on the second floor. There's a [gauge of the liberal postulate?] of the institution.

WC: How did he rejuvenate it? What do you recall—

GB: What I mean by that is this: a massive sort of membership campaign, rallies. It was the NAACP under Edwin Edmonds that brought Martin Luther King here and to this campus, when even churches wouldn't let him in. I will not go into calling the names of the churches that were contacted. I happen to know it, as I said, because the office was—he had his office right upstairs with the students, right up there in 208. And we [had it] at the chapel, and of course, we had an overflow here, right in this assembly, and brought the people there.

Let me have her call [unclear].

[Recording paused. Interview continues in a car.]

WC: He was talking about Elizabeth Laizner and Jim McMillan.

GB: Yes, they were leading the line, demonstration line, going towards the square, as I said, white man, black woman—I pardon, white woman, black man. Now, Jim is the chairman of the art department out at Guilford College and was very, very much involved in everything. In fact, that particular day was to be a silent march on the part of the black professionals in the community.

Unknown: This is in connection with the sit-ins?

WC: Yes.

GB: Sit-ins and subsequent demonstrations.

Unknown: [unclear]

WC: Yes.

GB: And then Daniel [Webster] Wynn's—

Unknown: There's that book put out [unclear]

GB: No, Daniel Wynn's new book is out, also on the black protest movement, where he gives some—I don't know if I let you see it at all yet.

Unknown: [unclear]

GB: There's one [chapter] strictly on the Greensboro things.

Unknown: Yeah, there is one.

WC: It's kind of a journalistic—

GB: Yeah, which I don't like.

WC: No, it's not very good, I think. One of the problems, of course, is that, you know, there's so much more to any event than what appears in the immediate occurrence of the event. And I think that, really, probably most of the interviews done with the original four sit-in

people, so much attention gets focused on the actual event of sitting in that very little has been done about the background, which is really crucial, I think, to the whole thing. As well as what Dr. Breathett has been saying about the extent to which the ongoing story of the movement goes far beyond the initial participants. And I have heard from many people how important the Bennett role was.

GB: I think that, for example, Ed Edmonds, I just cannot give him too much credit, because he is that intensely dedicated kind of person both in would-action as well as spirit. He kept hammering away with the rallies at the churches to raise money and various other sorts of things to really make the NAACP—you see, the small people in this town regard the NAACP as a middle-class thing, and there has been very little done to—excuse me, I have to run in the house; I'll run right out—there has been very little done to involve these people at all in what was their [unclear].

[Recording paused]

WC: You were talking about Dr. Edmonds. Is it Dr. Edmonds?

GB: Yes.

WC: Yes.

GB: He has a PhD from Boston University. He was chairman of our sociology [department] when he was here.

WC: Somewhere—I have sort of gotten the impression from someone that he had left because he was so—because he was disillusioned with the situation here. Does that ring a bell, or—

GB: Well, I think he at some point may have felt that the community was not as supportive of him as a person as he would have liked to see. And I wouldn't go—Ed is my friend, so I wouldn't go into that at all.

WC: Yeah.

GB: I think here he has certain kinds of expectation levels. He is basically a front-line operator who expects to be recognized for that. I think this was a kind—this is a kind of community—let's see if [unclear] highway rather than go—I would take Florida Street because we're going out this way. And I think you get this within the personality structures of many people. Now, you see, as I said to you earlier, the NAACP here

involved old-line Greensboro. So in some ways Ed could be regarded as a kind of interloper. He's taking over what's ours. This is not uncommon, you know. So this is the kind of thing. And when he left, he got that. He had fallen upon pretty hard times because he expended so much of himself and his personal resources in this effort. While the student who worked closest with him as an assistant and did just about all of the clerical work involved in that operation was Cecile Harrison, who is now an assistant professor of sociology at Texas Southern University. I think she now has her PhD from the University of Texas in sociology.

WC: Do you recall Dr. Player at any point discussing Spencer Love with anybody?

GB: No.

WC: Would she had any kind of faculty council meeting around the time of the sit-ins to get support for her position of whatever it happened to be at that time?

GB: Well, I think we did have one with regard to the Jeromes. You see, that was an entirely different kind of day.

WC: Right, right. I understand that.

GB: You see that wasn't a part of the black movement as such. That is what would be our attitudes towards those people. That's all.

WC: Yeah.

GB: I do not recall any discussion about that. Dr. [Gallow?] called us to discuss the Jeromes. And for everything we did, there was discussion, but the support of individuals was never a thing in question, you see. We took a stand, as I said, because we were not relying on Southern philanthropy.

WC: Yeah.

GB: Which put us in a different boat than some other institutions. We were trying to stand for what we felt was right. And certainly, if the black—if you're going to—if education is supposed to produce leadership, how in the hell are you going to stand in the background and say, "Okay, you guys, you little guys who don't have anything to lose, get out there and do it, and we'll reap the benefits." You see? Well, that's the kind of thing.

WC: Yeah. There must have been a sense at some point of the difference between Bennett and A&T, just in terms of partly the freedom to act.

GB: Well, I think not only the freedom, but, you see, we had an entirely different kind of clientele. We had people, even students, who could be less intimidated—

WC: Yes.

GB: —than the student who came from the little town, maybe from a farm situation or something—you know, you never know. But these people had not develop the kind of [security?]
—at that time, about 76% of our students came from professional families, which gave them a certain sense of self that they had not had. For example, a good 68% of our students came outside of the state of North Carolina at that time.

WC: Yes.

GB: Here again, you see, it makes a difference. So it was depending on how we felt, but had always been the general feeling of has he opened his doors, you know, to all kinds of people? One of the most stimulating sessions I've had with anyone was right on the Bennett College campus with Owen Lattimore. Owen Lattimore's wife is the daughter of Thomas F. Holgate, for whom the library on the Bennett College campus is named, if my memory and history serve me well.

WC: Was there any—did the particular nature of the Bennett College student body, constituency, affect the way in which—well, did it cause tension in the community? Was Bennett seen as kind of an elitist institution which caused some kind of conflict within the community?

GB: Bennett was always highly respected in this community, and I think people would have very surprised if we hadn't taken a certain kind of leadership.

[End of Interview]

WC: A few comments on Mr. Breathett's remarks. He talked about Bill Hampton, said that Hampton has to be seen in light of the time that he was serving. He pointed out that at that time there was no way in which a black would have been elected to [Greensboro] City Council unless he was acceptable to whites, since there was no ward system. Therefore, he had to be the man he was, someone who played both sides and who was acceptable to white people. This was really a product of the system as it existed.

He also indicated that—told a story about Hampton and a [Greensboro] Coliseum issue. Hampton had come to them and said, “Don’t push the issue of segregated toilets in the coliseum. Let’s have the thing built first, and then talk about segregation.” And as it turned out, of course, by the time that the coliseum was finished, the issue of segregation in public accommodations had already been decided by the courts and the Congress.

So Hampton then—what Hampton—what that said about Hampton was that he was a man who was a product of his times. That he certainly was no activist, certainly no protest leader, but that certainly some blacks did believe he was doing his best. Even then, though, there would have been a division of opinion about how strong he was.

Breathett himself spent much of the time at lunch denouncing the idea that there were any great differences between black culture and white culture or styles of life, and seemed very intent on both boosting the idea of Bennett as a major source of activism within the community in terms of organizing, sending out students to help the less well-off, as well as talking about Bennett’s record of having a distinctive clientele, which is different from—