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William Henry Chafe Oral History Collection

INTERVIEWEE: Mary Taft Smith

INTERVIEWER: William Chafe

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WILLIAM CHAFE: But he was on the school board in that period, and were you active in the fifties in the YWCA [Young Women's Christian Association] group or—?

MARY TAFT SMITH: No, I was active at West Market Street Methodist Church. And some year, I forget which year, I was chairman of the board of whatever it is—it keeps changing its name—social concerns.

WC: Social concerns.

MS: I don't remember who brought it up—whether I or somebody else brought it up—but we did decide to write a letter to some of the restaurants urging that they accept the Negroes. At that time the restaurants—it was just after the thing had occurred at the—

WC: S&W [Cafeteria]?

MS: Not the S&W.

WC: Woolworth's.

MS: Yes, Woolworth's. So we did write a letter, and I know our pastor signed it after we had made some changes. He didn't want some of the things that we were saying. But after we changed it, he signed it with us.

WC: Was this Dr. [Charles] Bowles?

MS: Yes.

WC: Wasn't there a lot of controversy about his signing?

MS: Yes, there was. I think [Robert] Boyd Morris was the head of the restaurant over on Elm Street.

WC: Mayfair [Cafeteria]?

MS: Mayfair, yes. He was the one we especially sent it to. I can't remember why, but because he was right there. And I think that he was mayor of the city, maybe. So we sent this letter to him and he turned it over to his lawyer, who happened to have grown up as our next door neighbor. They were trying to get me down to the television station to answer what this lawyer had to say, and for some reason or other I just couldn't get away at that time. But then, as now, again, we were a one-car family—it looks as if we are a two-car family, but one of them doesn't work—so I could not go on the errand and answer whatever this young man had to say or question. But we got full publicity in the papers about that.

WC: Was there some substantial division within the church itself?

MS: Well, there probably was. I'm sure the social concerns group is always a minority group. But we never tried to figure out what the size of the majority or the minority were. But I'm sure that Dr. Bowles felt that there were a large number of people who would not want to go into the restaurant if it was integrated.

WC: When he left West Market Street, was that voluntary departure or was he pressured by the controversy?

MS: Well, there were other controversies. Spending too much on the chapel offended some people. It was a beautiful chapel with handsome doors, and some people felt the money should have gone other places. So he did leave here with some controversy, but he had his full time here in the Methodist system. See, no matter where you are as a minister, you could—if you maintained your popularity too long, that means you are doing a bad job.

MS: Well, that's right.

WC: When did you come to Greensboro?

MS: Thirty-nine.

WC: Nineteen thirty-nine?

MS: Let me see, it was '39 when we built this house. We came here in '36.

WC: To Greensboro College?

MS: Yes.

WC: Did you both teach at Greensboro?

MS: No, I never taught.

WC: Just your husband [Raymond]?

MS: No, I never taught, except in Sunday school.

WC: And where did you come from?

MS: We came from Winston-Salem. My husband was director of religious education at [Centenary Methodist?] Church in Winston-Salem.

WC: So you both are natives of the area?

MS: Oh, no. I'm from Chicago. He went to the University of Chicago. That's how we happened to meet.

WC: And have you grown up—

MS: I grew up in Chicago.

WC: I see, so that you were one of the large group of people who really came to Greensboro in the late thirties and early forties and not necessarily with Southern roots?

MS: That's right. There's a great many of us. I belonged for years to the League of Women Voters, and most of the members are not natives. Hardly ever do we find a native. They come from everywhere.

WC: Does that organization get itself involved in things like civil rights, or did it in the fifties, to your recollection?

MS: In a way, but it has never been a part of its agenda because the national [league] realized it would be too divisive, and they do want to work on other things that we could see some accomplishments by. So they have not put any of that, no special problems, on the agenda. And each local league chooses a local subject. Also the state league chooses a state subject. And the whole national league chooses a national subject with local ramifications. But it hasn't seemed wise to divide the strength of the league by [unclear] that kind of problem.

WC: Yes, I can understand that. Coming from Chicago and from a sort of different kind of environment, do you recall how you thought about Greensboro and the race problem in Greensboro? Did you think, especially in terms of Greensboro's approach, [unclear] other places in the South or the North?

MS: Well, I guess I have learned to take it for granted that there was separation in organizations and many different things, but I was very pleased when the Community Council[?], for instance, opened itself, and that was a big step—opened itself to Negroes. At the present time it seems absurd and strange that it should ever have existed without having Negro members. But they had a personnel committee that made a report. I remember being very much pleased and startled to hear the report of that committee to admitting Negro representatives. See, it's all by representatives of different organizations, though I was only at large. It was quite a big step. And I wish I remember which year—I would say that it was about '56. I don't know.

WC: I think it probably was about that time.

MS: One member of that committee that I remember because she was a member of my church—and I think she made the report for the committee—it was Mrs. Mildred Cooper. Dr. [Franklin] McNutt, who used to be at Woman's College [now The University of North Carolina at Greensboro], was the chairman of that committee, deciding which representatives from new organizations should be taken in. And I think he did not make the report and that she made it, but I'm not quite sure about it now. Anyway, I know that they had worked together on this committee and had decided that the time was right when they could ask in the other organizations.

WC: When the Supreme Court decision [*Brown v. Board of Education*] was handed down in 1954, what was you and your husband's feelings about the possibilities for implementing it? What do you think it meant?

MS: It's hard for me to remember what we discussed and what we talked about. We were very much interested. My son, who was a teacher then at [unclear] Junior High, volunteered to go to the school that was the most integrated as a teacher. That was at [unclear]. And the man who was the principal there is going to be buried today. And I think his life was shortened by the experiences he went through the two years that he was guiding that integration. So it really was a very hard experience when the Negro children first came there. I guess not a large number of them, but there was enough so that—the white people were, of course, the ones that made the trouble. I remember my son saying he told a friend who was a newspaper photographer there, "You're making it harder for us." They were blowing it up, making it publicity; people from the big magazines were there. So instead of being able to be done in a quiet way, [unclear] they had to just come up against a hard wall of opposition.

WC: How was your husband chosen for the school board? I know that you both had been involved in civic activities, but was there something in particular which led him to be appointed?

MS: The fact that we were outside the city limits, which we aren't now. You see, the city council chooses part of the members, and the county commissioners chooses the other part, because as they explained to me when they first came here, some parts of the school district—part of the city school system is outside the city limits. And the county commissioner chooses one representative, and he was one of these.

WC: And he had been active in the educational system of this area before he was chosen?

MS: We've had children in school for years. He'd already been PTA [Parent Teacher Association] president over at [Greensboro Senior] High School [now Grimsley]. That was rather funny. I was on the committee to get a president for the Senior High School PTA. And he got so tired of me calling people and having them refuse, he said, "If you call two more and don't get any response, I'll take it." So he became the president of the Senior High PTA. That was in '45. And it was some years later when he went on the school—no, he went on the school board about the same time. I remember the year that our older son graduated, in '45, he was welcomed as one of the members. I believe that was the year he became a member of the school board.

WC: What was your general impression of Mr. Benjamin Smith's attitude toward this question?

MS: I don't remember how I felt then. I felt that he was not doing enough to prepare for it. He hoped that it could slide in gradually if there was not too much publicity given to it. And I thought he was mistaken, because I had heard a talk—I think it was Mrs. [Susie W.] Jones, who was the wife of the president of Bennett College. You know Mr. [David Dallas] Jones?

WC: Yes.

MS: Anyway, we were in an organization, the Interracial Intercollegiate—what was the rest of the name?—Fellowship [Greensboro Community Fellowship?]. It was both intercollegiate and interracial. I remember at a meeting she was telling us about the way it was done in [Cincinnati?]. She felt that they had a very successful integration. This might have been a couple of years later, I don't remember now. The PTA and teachers' organizations worked together to prepare the other parts of the organization for this move, and being aware of that, I felt that we had not done that kind of preparation here. Of course, my husband at the school board meetings would hear Ben Smith's persuasive arguments that we just do this very quietly and nothing bad will happen. He may have felt that Ben Smith was right.

WC: Your husband was certainly one of the most liberal members of the school board, was he not?

MS: Well, that's right. He had great faith in the others and thought of them as men who were eager to do the right thing. He had high respect for the other members, even though he may have been a [unclear] trying to get them to do things.

WC: I'm not sure that it's fair to ask you to try and recall the names of the people who were on the board then—I can recall some of them—whether you both felt that there were factions on the board. But my own instinct would be that your husband and Mrs. [Sarah Mendenhall] Brown would probably have been the two most liberal members.

MS: Now, that's true. That's several years later, though.

WC: This is around '54, the time of the '54 decision?

MS: Well, I don't remember. Mrs. Pleasant was on the board at the time my husband was—Ed Hudgins, a lawyer.

WC: John Foster.

MS: John Foster was on.

WC: Mr. [unclear] was on for awhile.

MS: That's right, and Dr. [William] Hampton. Dr. Hampton succeeded Dr. David Jones.

WC: It would seem that the board in the early fifties was, with one or two exceptions, was fairly liberal in its outlook, which makes it kind of surprising that after the initial support of the *Brown* decision, there seem to be a lag.

MS: I feel so, too.

[Recording paused]

WC: We were talking about the lag after the approval of the *Brown* decision, and you were saying that might have been due to Mr. Ben Smith's—

MS: Well, should we say, cautious approach to the problem.

WC: So you think that if Mr. Ben Smith had applied more pressure and moved more decisively, that things might have happened more quickly?

MS: They might have prepared better for it. We do know of other places that did make more of a preparation.

WC: Was this a period—talking now about the fifties especially, the late fifties, do you recall your own feelings about these developments? Was there still optimism? Was there disillusionment? How would you characterize your outlook, if you could recall, at that point?

MS: Well, being naturally optimistic, that covers any memories I have about it. I felt that things were going much too slowly and I felt that I must do anything I could do to help the things move along. In one of those years, it was just the one student—one black student [Josephine Boyd] over at [Senior] High School—and I was in the same organization of Interracial Intercollegiate Fellowship with the teacher of this girl. And she told me how the girl would come to her and say, "I just can't stand it again."

And she said, "Try just one more day and see how things will go."

The boys making fun of her and harassing her, she taking her lunch and eating it in a little room off the library where she was an assistant to the librarian. All those harassments, of course, distressed us very much, and seems as though they should be able to deal with those much more decisively. But otherwise I don't remember except [unclear].

WC: Did you—getting kind of outside of the school board itself—did you attribute the opposition to any particular source? If you were to find someone to criticize for not having done as much as you would like them to do in that period, who can you think of?

MS: I would say simply the Southern custom, habits of people, attitudes that had been bred into them for years so that they couldn't go into a restaurant with a black person, they couldn't go to school with a black person. That sort of thing we would hear about—know that there were individuals who felt it so sharply that they would talk against it.

WC: How about—do you feel that the other churches in the community, for example, were doing all that they might have done?

MS: None of the churches have done what they should do, including my own. We have had Negro people to come to the church. They haven't been turned out at the doorsteps as they have in some places, but they haven't felt so welcome that they would come back time and time again. The [unclear] brings some Negro girls to the church with them from time to time, girls who visit them in their home. People are used to seeing it. Last year a young African came to this. I think he was at [North Carolina] A&T [State University], or anyway he was in this city. I can't think of his name. He's now gone to Atlanta. And he became a member of my Sunday school class. One of the members of the class came in one day and looked around and said, "All those trouble makers are in here." So that's the kind of class it is—I mean the people who are wanting to stir things up and do things differently. Anyway, this young man was in this class and one of our friends, who is a successor to my husband at Greensboro College, brought him into the membership of the church. And our minister said, "All right, especially if he came in his African robe so that he would be obviously an African, not an American Negro." So he did that. Sundays he would always wear these handsome robes.

WC: Was this last year?

MS: Year before last. It was last year that he moved to Atlanta. I forget why.

WC: How about the attitudes of business?

MS: Well, haven't they so immensely—where you can go into business offices and find Negro girls as secretaries and people in the stores.

WC: Do you think the business and institutions of Greensboro have been basically a constructive force?

MS: Just in the last few years. I don't think they had any great leadership back when leadership was needed. My husband learned from his brother in South Carolina of how it happened in South Carolina, that the governor decided, "We don't want any of this trouble such as they had had in other states here in this state, so let's see to it that we avoid that." And that way the big business men were called together, and the governor talks with them, and they did give the leadership, so that—well, it's amazing. We go to the nursing home in [unclear] South Carolina to see my mother-in-law, who is ninety-seven, and the Negroes and whites are all in together in the nursing home. It's just amazing to us—of what we have known after all these years—that it could have changed so radically. Now, here in this state it hasn't been a getting together of businessmen to decide we are going to avoid troubles. I think it just sort of slid along.

WC: So they have followed rather than led, in general, until recently?

MS: I would think so.

WC: Of course, shortly after your husband retired from the school board, well, not to shortly after, but there came the sit-ins. You had the demonstrations of the 1960s. Did you and your liberal friends generally think of these as being healthy developments which you favored?

MS: Yes, people that I know did.

WC: You thought that here in Greensboro, for example, this was a necessary step to bring the kind of progress which you would have liked to have seen?

MS: I think so. I've been so torn and confused perhaps between the war demonstrations and many others, and it's hard for me to remember which we're talking about, thinking about.

WC: Well, there was the Woolworth's sit-in in 1960, the Mayfair and S&W [cafeterias] in 1963, and, of course, in Greensboro there have been more later in '69. But those were the two I was thinking of primarily—the early sixties.

MS: Mayfair was in '63, you said?

WC: Yes, it was the S&W, Mayfair, the theaters were being picketed at that time. But a whole group of demonstrations took place over about a six month period.

MS: Wasn't it in '62 that Woolworth's—?

WC: It was '60 that Woolworth's changed.

MS: I remember I was in New York City at that time, at a meeting about the United Nations. And the lady that I had known in Greensboro came in and spoke to me and said there are big things going on in Greensboro right at this time, and I hadn't seen the Greensboro paper as she had seen. And I knew that was early '60 when I was there.

WC: Well, it was the first sit-in of the civil rights movement, and, of course, within a month it had spread all over the South from Greensboro. And, of course, many of the leaders of the movement came out of Greensboro, so it's a very important location. And it's also very interesting to explain why it happened in Greensboro rather than other places. I guess there is no simple answer to that.

MS: No, it was just the happening of some concerned young men getting together and talking, I guess.

WC: Greensboro College, has its policy toward blacks always been an open one?

MS: Depends on how open you mean. Now, year after year there would be the religious emphasis and a speaker would be brought in, and for several years anyway they always invited the choir from Bennett College to come and take part in that, and they would have a sort of a social afterwards. Well, that was all my husband's doing, and that was almost as far as the interracial doings went. Except that I remember the friend that was in the education department, Dr. Elizabeth Banner. She became Mrs. Banner. Later Elizabeth Young had some workshop or something like that for education teachers, and she included the Negro teachers in the education department in that.

WC: So that would involve A&T and Bennett?

MS: Yes, they were invited—I remember going to an evening meeting where they were showing pictures and having a talk on educational methods, and they were all included. There were blacks and whites together. [Missionary E.] Stanley Jones, when he was here as a speaker, he insisted on it being an interracial meeting when he gave his talk. So there were just those few incidents where Greensboro College was open.

WC: How about Mr. [Gordon] Blackwell? He was the president of Greensboro College, wasn't he?

MS: No, Blackwell was at Woman's College.

WC: Oh, that was Woman's College.

MS: President [Luther] Gobbel was president, then Harold [Hutson]—I can't think of his name; he was Harold to me—the one who followed Dr. Gobbel.

WC: I was just thinking of the responses, that there were some Greensboro College women who intended to take part in the 1960 sit-ins and the chancellor at Greensboro was slightly upset at that, and I was just wondering if you recall anything about that episode?

MS: No.

WC: Perhaps that might have been one of your husband's students?

MS: It may have been. I just don't recall. And I think it was probably Woman's College people.

WC: There were both. Do you think that generally the universities in the community have much of an impact on the public policies?

MS: I don't think I have any thought on that.

WC: Sometimes just because there are a large number of colleges and it's presumed that the college is an important influence in the community, and I think it perhaps interesting to find out whether that's true or not. Did you and your liberal friends feel isolated in Greensboro at all? Did you feel that you were on an island without terribly much support?

MS: Once in a while I felt that way and wondered if I was conspicuous, and there have been few occasions when I have had reason to feel that I was. For instance, one of the members of our church wrote a letter to the paper and referred—he was objecting to some policy of Dr. Bowles—I'm not sure. Earlier our minister had agreed with me that we could have open meetings for a workshop we had at church. But anyway, this man wrote in the paper, "People like the Raymond Smiths," so that made me feel sort of conspicuous.

WC: Do you feel any kind of hostility from those around you?

MS: Not in general.

WC: I understand from Mrs. [Kay] Troxler that you were down keeping a peace vigil, and I'm sure people recognize you and know you.

MS: Well, enough people have said nice things about it to counteract whatever the others would say, so we know that there are both kinds of people in the community. And I've had the chance to work with such fine people that I can always think of them rather than the others. Did Mrs. Troxler feel that she was sort of [unclear]?

WC: Oh, sometimes she does. She thinks of herself sort of fighting against a massive wave of different sort of hostility.

MS: But she keeps working at it, bringing the colored children down to make use of our toys in the Sunday school rooms.

WC: Would you say that Greensboro is a responsive place in which to live? That is, you were basically pleased with it as a community in which differences [are] tolerated and progress can be made?

MS: I would think so. I think of a friend of mine in Winston-Salem—where we lived and she was on the school board—and she said she felt that she was batting her head against a stone wall all the time because of the [R. J.] Reynolds' interests that was predominant on the school board. They would be willing to build new buildings, things that showed, but they didn't want to raise salaries. And that was one of her concerns at that time. So I felt that we really did have a progressive community with a lot of people who were willing to make changes, willing to accept change, I think. But there again, you can't tell how much of it is an innate feeling. I sometimes think that Kay Troxler is too much weighed by the opposition. She's had some good backing in a lot of the things she's doing, and I try to remind her of that.

WC: When your husband was on the school board in the fifties, at the time of the decision, were you threatened, intimidated, or—?

MS: Yes, we had firecrackers put in our mailbox and it was broken up. We had telephone calls in the middle of the night. We had harassment.

WC: Was this frequent?

MS: No, I guess not. There were, oh, six or eight incidents maybe, but it wasn't nightly.

WC: Did you have police protection?

MS: No, we were outside the city limits then. It seems to me we took some threatening letters down to the post office to show them, because it is against the law. And we knew that Ben Smith was having a lot more at his house, so we felt fairly well protected, I guess, since he was enduring so much more. Have you talked to Mrs. Ben Smith?

WC: I talked to Ben Smith Jr. I probably will talk to Mrs. [Louise] Smith.

MS: Wasn't he away?

WC: He was away part of the time, but he was here during the immediate period.

MS: I forgot, he was in the submarine part of the time, and I can't remember just when he got back.

WC: Just one more question, really. This is a hard question, I realize. Of three or four of the most important people, the most powerful people the ones who carried the most weight in Greensboro during the period of the fifties and the early sixties, what are some of the names which would pop into your mind?

MS: Well, I think of some of the mayors that I've had contact with, Ben Cone, Mr. [Robert] Frazier—and he probably would say that he had not been very influential because he didn't get some things done that he had hoped, urged to get done about the downtown. At the present time it's becoming more of the downtown he had hoped that it would be. I suppose there were other Cones maybe that were more influential than Ben Cone. Mr. [Edward] Hudgins on the school board. The man who put up the Jefferson-Standard Building—what is the name of that big family in insurance?

WC: Yes, I know the—but I don't know the names—the Holdens [Holderness?]?

MS: No, some of them are still living.

WC: Well, I'm sure I can find out.

MS: He was very important here. Their father died in an automobile wreck coming down from Blowing Rock, I believe [Julian Price]. It was that family that put up the Catholic church on West Market Street. And that name should come to me. But theirs has been a very influential family, I think. Holden is a name of people who have been very influential. And probably I have left out somebody who would seem most important to me.

WC: Would Mr. [Spencer] Love have been one of those people?

MS: I suppose he was, but he wasn't seen as much because he was in Palm Beach a good deal of the time. But I suppose he really was home. His successor, Mr. Collin[?] was also on the school board—he wasn't his successor. His father was at the First Presbyterian Church [Charles Myers].

WC: I don't have that name. I haven't kept up with the current hierarchy of—

[End of Interview]