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William Henry Chafe Oral History Collection

INTERVIEWEE: William Snider

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WILLIAM SNIDER: —young agitators of the kind of ilk that some of their critics would like—

WILLIAM CHAFE: But when they did sit-in, it was a surprise to you and to most of your friends?

WS: I suppose that it was. It's hard to reconstruct those years.

WC: Yeah, I know it is. Do you recall whether—when it did happen—and these were just the four boys sitting in at the Woolworth's and gradually some other students from UNCG [The University of North Carolina at Greensboro] and from Bennett [College] adjoining—Woman's College [now UNCG] at that point—do you recall conversations that you and your friends had at that time—again, people who would probably be called the leadership of Greensboro—about the issue and how it might be resolved? How did you feel about it?

WS: It was a very difficult time then, which it was a sort of a grappling around or searching around for leadership in the town. And there were a number of your conservative [unclear] people who felt very strongly that it's a matter of private property, or the principle of private property is very important to that issue. There were others who—like Ed[ward] Zane, who eventually became the leader of this move—to try to find a way to work it out, going to the national headquarters of Woolworth's and doing some other things to try to get this thing off dead center and go ahead and get it resolved.

He, I think, was very effective as a leader at that time because, being a corporate executive of Burlington Industries, which was the largest—Cone [Mills] was the largest—business establishment here, industrial establishment, he was in a position to carry some [unclear] with his own associates at that level. And at the same time, he had very good connections in the black community among the black establishment, the people, including the president of [North Carolina] A&T [State University] and others who were quite interested, to avoid any real violence and to get something done about it. So with that kind of leadership, I think, we were—you've read the Miles Wolff book [*Lunch at the 5 & 10*], I'm sure.

WC: Yeah.

WS: I think he did a very good job on that. My feeling was that Zane had the right idea and this was where it ought to go, and this was my inclination editorially, to support that kind of leadership. Again, as I say, we had pressures here, too, among my superiors who felt a little bit different than I did.

WC: Now, at that point you were the editor-in-chief?

WS: I was associate editor at the time. I was not the editor until 1965.

WC: Mr. [H. A. "Slim"] Kendall was—

WS: Kendall was the editor then, and he was inclined, while sympathetic, to be very cautious about it—going too far editorially.

WC: At that time, do you recall meetings that took place either involving you or that you knew about prior to the setting up of Zane's committee [Human Relations Commission]? Were you involved in the decision that that should be the way it would be handled, or do you know how that decision was—?

WS: No. At that time, this was done pretty much a secret from the press. It seems to me there was an effort to try to do it without letting it be known, for fear that this would break it down—sort of like a Henry Kissinger diplomatic mission that has to be kept under cover. And I had the impression that most of the work that was done on a private basis. Then we would be let in on it from time to time. So this is a different kind of thing than the thing the fifties, in the sense that there wasn't any initiative on our part, it was not—

WC: Now, you would have known Ed Zane personally prior to this?

WS: Yes, I'd known him.

WC: And the other people on his committee?

WS: I knew most of them. You could call their names and I would recognize them. I don't recall all who was on there now. George Evans was on it, I believe.

WC: I actually have no record of it myself.

WS: George Evans is a good man, incidentally, to go to. Have you been to see him?

WC: No, I haven't.

WS: You should see him. He's a surgeon. He's in our conversation group, incidentally—the one that was started way back with Tartt Bell, and, in fact, one evening talked about this thing to us and his relations with Mayor [David] Schenck and what happened on Human Relations Committee and how this whole thing moved along at that time. And you really should go talk to him.

WC: Yeah, I would like to.

WS: Probably be a very good source.

WC: Yeah. Would you have had any contact with—would Spencer Love have been involved in this in any way?

WS: Not that I know of, except indirectly through Ed Zane. He usually [had] some man or had a man who would be involved in community affairs, and Ed Zane happened to be the man who was sort of given that allocation, to accomplish the policy of community involvement.

WC: Did you know Love very well yourself?

WS: Yeah, I knew Love pretty well.

WC: Now, he's a man who is talked about frequently, but it's hard to sort of find out too much about him. I just wondered how you met him and how you characterized his own involvement in the community.

WS: A very strange kind of man, a man who had a lot of large ego but an inferiority complex. He came out of World War I, I think, as a major. I worked for a man who was closely associated with him, Governor [R. Gregg] Cherry in 1946, when I—just after I had gotten out of World War II, and I guess I came to know him then a little bit. Love spent a great deal of his early years—you see, Love is a man who put together this textile empire just sort of by the seat of his pants. Everybody said he could never do it. It was in synthetic fibers, and he started this whole business on his own, and he simply astonished the whole textile world that he was able to put it together. And everybody said, “Oh, well, after the war is over, it will fall apart.” [unclear] needing all this textile material during the war, the uniforms and the tires and other things, and so it turns out that he not only did it during the war, but he managed to do it afterwards, too, and he kept it together and built on it.

And he was a strange combination of a man. He had a great inclination toward some sort of public service or educational service in his family background. If you look back you will find Camillia Thrope's[?] [unclear] at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He had people who had been prominent in academic affairs. He was in certain traditions of public service. At the same time, he was—someone said about Jimmy Carter, “He's tough as an old war brat”—very slender, frail-looking fellow who was—sort of gave you the impression of ducking his head around. Not very impressive personally, but with a tremendous inner drive, and spent a great deal of his early years making it in the textile world and the large outside world, and only in his floating years does he come back to Greensboro and get interested in his own image in the community as a citizen.

WC: The early years would be what, 1926 to 1940?

WS: Well, at least.

WC: Around then? What would you characterize as the later years, when he comes back?

WS: I think that they would be the years after World War II. I've forgotten exactly when he died now, but—

WC: Sometime in the early sixties, perhaps.

WS: But at that time, I always felt that had he lived, he would have been a very large factor in a number of interesting things. For an example, the story was always told that he—suddenly it was all these [Richard] Nixon bumper stickers out in the Burlington Industries parking lot in 1960, and suddenly it was learned that Spencer Love was going to be for [John F.] Kennedy. [laughter] Suddenly, the next day, most of them were gone.

Love was a very [unclear] kind of fellow, but he was just as ruthless as he could be in the business world. He was tough. I've heard that there is a reputation of the company: a great many of his people, they came and went very quickly; let's put it that way.

WC: But those who stayed seemed to develop an intense loyalty to him.

WS: Very much so, like Ed Zane is one of them, and, I guess, J.C. [unclear] was another. But he was hard to work for, no doubt about that. And I think he probably cultivated tension. He was an interesting kind of guy, and I think had he lived, would have been a factor certainly in the leadership of the community. He was most of the most—he was becoming more involved all of the time.

WC: It's fascinating because his name seems always to be never central, but always peripheral to a lot of these things. People talked about him a lot—he almost was a kind of a figure of mystery to someone coming here from the outside who hears his name and knows that he is important but really has a hard job putting a finger on the man and what he did.

WS: Well, he was an interesting person, a strange mixture.

WC: I'm impressed by how many people he seems to have brought up from—I don't mean the bottom in a raciality [sic] sense—who he seemed to have brought into the firm at a relative low level, and then after they developed intense personal relationship, they would stay with and become the leaders of the firm.

WS: He invited me up with the manager of the economic club in New York to hear Nikita Khrushchev, I never will forget going up there—the late fifties.

WC: [Nineteen] fifty-seven or '58 [sic, 1959] when Khrushchev was here.

WS: This little plane—and it really was an interesting experience. I didn't get to know him very well. He asked me to do some research and writing for him, and I did that. He was an interesting kind of guy in that he would poke around and find people he was interested in. He was very active, imaginative, energetic.

WC: Traveled a lot, too, I gathered. I'm just going to hop around here a little bit. But another name that I see, particularly in terms of the 1960s, is Willa Player of Bennett, and I just wondered if you had had much contact with her?

WS: I didn't really. I knew her and knew her favorably from all that I had heard. She seems to have been an influential person in the black community, so far as I know.

WC: Bennett itself, of course, is an interesting institution, I think. I wonder if there are incidents or people at Bennett who you might describe who might sort of represent or in some ways typify what Bennett has been to the Greensboro community, white and black. Do you have any kind of vision or image of Bennett which is tied to a particular incident or person?

WS: It was an interesting institution, in that it was a small girl's school established by private [unclear]. I suppose one of the people I knew who was quite interested in it was Mrs. Laura Cone, whose name you may have heard. Mrs. Cone was an interesting personality in this community and was one who had considerable influence in race relations, I think. She did it very quietly, but she did it effectively. She supported Bennett very strongly, and she supported some of the movement in Greensboro, which I think led to whatever significance you might say the community had as a place of some moderation of progressiveness feeling about it.

Yes, indeed, I think the Cone family, generally, perhaps symbolizes—this as an interesting Jewish family which set a certain tone, a certain standard, not only in the Jewish community among their own, but in the community generally. And I think it accounts for the fact, along with the Quaker influence, as I've probably told you before, and the fact that we have six or seven colleges and universities here—it's quite a tremendous [unclear] setting. The toleration level of the community [unclear].

WC: I want to just switch back a second to a period before 1960, not too far before it, but the episode with Governor [Luther] Hodges at A&T is one which he writes about and which other people talk about, and it seems in some ways, at least in retrospect, to carry with it warnings of more active discontent. I wonder if you can remember anything about that episode which might be—

WS: It was certainly unfortunate that the way he pronounced words became an issue. I mean, from his point of view, he should have certainly tried to avoid that, it seems to me. And I don't think certainly much unintentionally on his part, but I think he probably underestimated the fact that using those words in that particular way was not a good thing for that time, and he was quite shocked by it, of course.

WC: By the response?

WS: Sort of like the minister down in Plains [Texas?] in quoting the deacons and saying the niggers and other agitators would be barred from the church. The deacons said, "We didn't say that. We said Negroes," you know. Hodges didn't realize that that particular pronunciation of the word—I guess what he said was Negroes, but that became an issue.

WC: Did you have much contact with him?

WS: Hodges?

WC: Yeah.

WS: Yes, he came by here when he first decided to run for lieutenant governor in '53. I remember I came in '51. And he was very much into it. This would have been in—not in '53, it would have been in '52, because he ran in '52 with [William B.] Umstead. And, yes, he was a good friend of Mr. Kendall's. I got to know him, then, afterwards. And I had very much respect for him, not only for his energy, but for his ability to assume a leadership role and moving a little further than the conventional wisdom—not much—but keeping a little bit ahead of things, as he constantly did all the way up until the time he became secretary of commerce under Kennedy. And I think he—particularly at that time, he and Pearsall saw the great problem of keeping the Beverly Lake people from sending North Carolina down this road of massive resistance, and they considered that a great achievement—which many others didn't accept as an achievement—but they saw it as a tremendous fight which they won.

WC: Actually, I think in those terms, there were only three or four newspapers to oppose the Pearsall Plan. The Smithfield *Herald* did—

WS: *The News & Observer*, I believe and the *Charlotte Observer*—

WC: I think the *Charlotte Observer* did also.

WS: I'm not sure how many others did.

WC: Most of the press in the state seems to have endorsed it.

WS: It seems to me at the time it was worth the gamble. I was willing to take the risk at that time if in fact the law meant what it said it did. The community could go as rapidly as it cared to go. But then, of course, in retrospect today, it didn't close schools, therefore the worst fears of those who opposed it didn't materialize. On the other hand, it could have been detrimental to the public schools.

WC: Detrimental in the sense that—

WS: They could have been closed and individual communities could have voted to close their schools. [unclear] them to say, tuition grants so forth for private schools—it was a risk. But, on the one hand, that was offered to the rural people, who were very much upset by the changes coming. And on the other hand, they had to accept the fact that places like Greensboro or Winston would go ahead then and open up the schools for token integration.

WC: If you had to pick a time—this is in some ways not a fair question—if you had to pick a time when you think that the black community began to have real participation in community-wide decision making, is there any event or episode that would stand out in your mind as representing that kind of change?

WS: I was trying to recall when the member of the city council who was the first black member—he was a doctor.

WC: Dr. [William] Hampton.

WS: Yeah, Dr. Hampton got the most votes in an election sometime in the mid-fifties, maybe the late fifties, which ordinarily would mean that that person would become mayor of Greensboro. And Dr. Hampton decided he would not become mayor, because he figured it probably wasn't time for him to do that. But the fact that his leadership was significant for that particular period—but then not too long after that, there began to be the feeling, I think, that the participation of the black community was very important in the council for government, and then you began to get some participation. Now how much it was and how effective it was, it's hard to measure. But increasingly there was communication within the two communities, between whites and blacks at certain levels. They seemed to agree that they would try to move it along, each trying to consider the consequences of either going too fast or too slow. And I think that I would say that Dr. Hampton's leadership was important. Maybe that was something of importance if you can go back and look up something about his role.

WC: Now the school board—the whole question of freedom of choice seems to be an issue which caused a lot of problems in the black community, a lot of concern in the black community. And it seemed to be a posture which the school board initially did not even announce but then subsequently did announce, but even then it became a problem because of what it was interpreted to mean into the mid-sixties, which I think eventually gave rise to the concern over racial balance. I wonder did the newspaper take a position of the freedom of choice issue that you recall?

WS: I must say that that is a rather hazy thing for me.

WC: Hazy phrased.

WS: Yes, it is. It was strenuously opposed for a long time in much of the white community, and after a while it became the position that the whites thought was [unclear] after this thing moved down the road beyond that—and then it became “we ought to have freedom of choice.” I don't specifically remember any episodes [unclear].

WC: Of course, the sit-ins in '63, in which Jesse Jackson is involved, are very different kinds of sit-ins than the initial. The initial ones only lasted five or six days and then it was over with, except during the period of tension when negotiations take place but the sit-ins aren't taking place. But three years later you have this massive, really, kind of action, which seems to in some ways overwhelm the ability of the leadership in the community to respond. Is that accurate to you?

WS: I suppose so. This was all part of a national move which—of course, which was reflected on colleges and the high school campuses in this case. The specific episode, if you go back and see it, involved the high school. In the grammar school over there across—near A&T, and I suppose it is just boiled up out of a national move that was indignation among blacks. I felt that the—in fact, they went down to hear Jesse Jackson speak at the [unclear] Club just months ago when he was down. McNeill Smith was getting an award. He—I've forgotten who the other person was. At that time, the relationship between Jesse Jackson and [unclear] and Captain [William] Jackson of the police force—it's a very interesting story, one which really should be pursued if you do anything in this area. McNeill Smith would be a very good person. He sent me some background material on this, and we had an interview with Captain Jackson, who still is here in retirement. And it would be interesting to see what led to this effort on Captain Jackson's part to keep the communications open and maintain an amicable relationship with Jesse Jackson and his group toward making these demonstrations possible and law-abiding and not bursting over the bounds of lawfulness, and he succeeded. They succeeded because of a certain respect for each other. And Jesse Jackson remembers that and pays some tribute to it. I heard him make this tremendous—you know, he has one speech—you've heard him, haven't you?

WC: Yeah.

WS: The speech he makes is very interesting, in which he says there is a time for all things. He speaks to a predominately black audience, and he is saying, “Okay, you've got to get with it. You've got to get your kids educated, and you've got to do the things you need to do now. We've come this far down the road now. We can't glory in all of the achievements

in the past, the sit-ins or anything else. We've got to move on to something else. We've got to be confident and ready." It's very powerful

WC: When is the first time you remember meeting McNeill ["Mac"] Smith?

WS: I knew McNeill Smith from Chapel Hill.

WC: So you've known him for quite awhile.

WS: [unclear] and I have met him when he was editor of the *Daily Tar Heel*. McNeill Smith is a Calvinist student and hides it. [laughter] He even did it in those days. He used to wear a cowboy hat down there, like he was a big, sort of an alcoholic Deke[?], you know, what I mean? In my day, that was the guy, a big hell raiser man on the campus. When in reality he was a Calvinist crusader, which he always has been. He's probably the smartest man in North Carolina, as far as brilliance of mind is concerned. Mac is absolutely brilliant, I think. The capacity to come up with new ideas, his ability to persuade and to reason as a lawyer—

WC: Do you remember his being involved in the sixties sit-ins at all?

WS: Mac was always involved in practically everything. I don't specifically remember. I know he was in, but I don't recall an episode. Have you talked to him?

WC: Yeah, I have. I want to do it again.

WS: He remembers everything.

WC: [unclear] recollection and I think he was very important in '63, especially more so than the fifties.

WS: Yes, he was. In '63 he certainly played a big role.

WC: He came to be a person who connections on both sides.

WS: Being in the big prestigious law firm here, he had connections in that he had commitments to this whole movement that was as strong as anyone you could find.

WC: Hypothetically, say that someone is writing a history book about Greensboro in the 1960s and they talk about the 1960 sit-ins and the '63 sit-ins and they say, "Here is a community which prides itself on being progressive, and which has a very significant

university and corporate structure and a liberal newspaper, under which it is possible to identify ten or fifteen, twenty, thirty people who would seem to be in favor of progress toward racial harmony. And yet it takes seven months in 1960 before Woolworth's desegregate its lunch counters and it takes"—and I'm not sure what the number of months is—"but there is an awful lot of fighting and squabbling before [unclear] and other public accommodations get desegregated in '63." How would you explain this in this kind of community?

WS: Well, I wouldn't oversell Greensboro's liberal reputation. I think it has ingredients which produce a certain moderate approach to problems of this kind, such as the Quaker influence, the Jewish influence, the educational influence, the fact that it doesn't have very much of an imposed establishmentarian point of view, such, I think, as Winston-Salem, for example, or say even Charlotte of there is more of a democratic spirit about the community. It seems to me it makes decisions harder to make, harder to reach, by the very reason that they are not imposed, and so I would say it isn't unusual at all that this sort of decision should require that much turmoil.

I think that it is worthwhile to think that it didn't cause more in the fact that you had somewhere, at some level in the police department and in the black community, the ability to communicate these feelings—and also the '60 thing, to get somebody working at Ed Zane's level to try to see if something can—could be worked out. So to me it isn't so significant that everybody didn't fall over and say "Well, we did it," because it wasn't very easy to do anywhere, and it was harder to. In other places it was done differently, and I think you could argue about whether or not doing it differently it might have produced better results. I don't fundamentally think so. I think you would see the same spirit working out in the public school system. And some problems in the last few years was based to a great extent on the reservoir of goodwill and the reservoir of leadership that exists in the white and black community over the years that made it possible to work out certain things and didn't completely destroy the public schools. I think that was very possible. Have you talked to Joan Bluethenthal?

WC: No, I haven't.

WS: You ought to talk to her. She has been very influential in some of the schools' activities. To me it was never easy. And I don't think—I think North Carolina, to some extent its liberal tradition has been paraded a great deal outside. There are—here it's sort of like an underground stream that comes up to the surface every now and then, and they are—and the general context is a great independence of spirit here, which I think makes for an open community and one which grappled with its problems and brings them out and debates them. The issues clash, but I have pretty much confidence in the outcome of the problems here as much as I would anywhere else. That isn't saying great deal. I think we

ought not to say too much, but at the same time I'm willing to think what still remains here and the kind of a community we have is a stimulation of all these things which across the years has had an impact.

[End of Interview]