

CIVIL RIGHTS GREENSBORO DIGITAL ARCHIVE PROJECT

William Henry Chafe Oral History Collection

INTERVIEWEE: William Thomas

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DATE: undated

WILLIAM CHAFE: I'm talking to William Thomas, who is a lifelong resident of Greensboro until recently. Is that right?

WILLIAM THOMAS: Yes, until I finished [North Carolina] A&T [State University], which was in—

WC: [Nineteen] sixty-six?

WT: [unclear] Yeah, '66.

WC: So you went to high school in Greensboro as well? [phone rings]

WT: Yeah, I went to Dudley High School in Greensboro

WC: And went—did you go to Lincoln [Middle School] as well?

WT: Yes, Lincoln, Washington Street [School], Jonesboro [Elementary School]

WC: Tony [A. Knighton] Stanley went to Washington Street, too, I think. Did you know him there?

WT: No, Tony was a little older than I am. Tony was a protégé of one of my sisters. I do know Tony, but I did not actually meet Tony until he came back to Greensboro at A&T.

WC: Right, because he came back in a position of—

WT: Some kind of religious role, chaplain or something.

WC: Right.

WT: I don't know what his role was.

WC: Right. Do you mind if I close that? I'm afraid the typewriter will get picked up on the—
So you'd been born during the war or shortly after the war?

WT: [Nineteen] forty-two.

WC: Forty-two. Had your folks lived in Greensboro?

WT: Yes, all my life, right there on Market Street.

WC: And your mother still lives there?

WT: That's correct.

WC: What are some of the memories you have of growing up in Greensboro, in terms of things you might have thought of later on, particularly when you became involved in civil rights activity? What kinds of messages did you get, either from your family or from your schoolmates or the white community, about what things were like in Greensboro—what you—whether Greensboro was a good place, a place where discrimination was overt or covert? Any memories about that kind of—those kinds of cues?

WT: Yes, I think basically Greensboro was a typical Southern town, being that it was a totally segregated town. It created a certain amount of isolation—you might say, consolation—for blacks, in that you were exposed to it, but you were not exposed to it. Ninety percent of your life was spent in your own community. The only time you really overtly faced it was when you went downtown and saw your “white only” restrooms or “colored” signs over your water fountains or if you could not sit down and eat at this particular restaurant. To certain extent there was security and safety in our isolation, in the housing patterns, in the schools, et cetera.

I guess with the advent of TV, newspapers, and probably the influence of our families, we really began to realize exactly what was happening. And I think that happened a little more rapidly in Greensboro because Greensboro is sort of an educational town, you have five or six major colleges there. You have fairly large middle-class populous that understood what was going on, I think, a little faster than did in other parts of the South. I think that's why you probably had things happening in Greensboro a little faster than other areas. We were exposed in terms of, you know, reading. My family read quite a bit. My father—I can remember listening to the news on the radio. It was a family ritual type thing. So we were aware of what was going on.

I guess this is another pro-strike for segregated education, and I think that provided a large impetus. Our teachers cared. They were concerned, and they in fact—they became personally involved with their students. So this was another catalyst, you know, in terms of creating an overall awareness of what the situation was.

WC: Did your parents vote? Were there any problems with their voting when you were growing up?

WT: I don't ever recall a problem with their voting. I really don't. I don't remember the first time that they voted, but I don't ever recall any problems with the voting. I guess in that way Greensboro may have been a bit ahead of other areas, too. I'm trying to see. I don't even remember literacy tests. Maybe they did have them, I just don't recall.

WC: One of the things I've found is that, at least for most of the people I've spoken with, both in terms of themselves and their parents, there is a long history of voting. And I think that the voting statistics also would say that Greensboro is a little bit different from at least some parts of the state.

WT: Our big problem in terms of voting was creating an awareness on the part of the people to take advantage of it, more so than forcing the powers to be to permit us to exercise that franchise.

WC: Do you remember—what church did you go to, I suppose?

WT: I went to Skeens Chapel Holiness Church. I was raised in a Holiness church. That was on Market Street at the time. They are now on Asheboro Street.

WC: Now, why would I ask that question? [laughs] I had a connection—oh, I was going to ask about candidates for office and whether—because Reverend [Julius] Douglas had been one of the first candidates to run for office.

WT: I knew Rev. Douglas very well, went to school with his daughters. That was St. James Presbyterian.

WC: Yeah. I guess that he and F. A. Mayfield ran for office before Dr. [William] Hampton got elected.

WT: Mayfield? That was a bit before my time.

WC: Yeah, I think so.

WT: I remember Dr. Hampton, who was elected to the school board, but I don't remember Mayfield.

WC: Were your parents involved at all in the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] or the Greensboro Men's Club or any of those kinds of things?

WT: No. No, they weren't, and became very involved—My father died my sophomore year at A&T, and my mother became very supportive of our activities during the entire civil rights thing. In fact, I think she was elected CORE [Congress of Racial Equality] Mother of the Year. I was chairman of CORE during that time, and I was president of the Youth Chapter of the NAACP. That was prior to my involvement with CORE. I was still in junior high school at the time.

WC: Really? When—So if you were in junior high school, that would have been 1959 or '60?

WT: Around '60, and I guess that was for two or three years. And we dissolved our youth chapter when the sit-ins broke out because the NAACP did not support nonviolent direct action at the time.

WC: Now, was this the second sit-ins or the first?

WT: The first sit-ins.

WC: First sit-ins. That was when you dissolved your NAACP?

WT: That's right, and we started a CORE chapter.

WC: Because a lot of the people who took part in those first sit-ins came out of the NAACP.

WT: Exactly, we all did. But at the time, the national office did not approve of those tactics.

WC: Did they let you know—in what form did they—

WT: With verbal. Ruby Hurley, I can remember her coming down. She worked out of the national office. Kelly Alexander was in Charlotte. And they attempted to maintain pretty tight control over what was going on. Floyd McKissick was a product of NAACP. He was very involved. I can remember when Gordon Carey first came down to Greensboro to help organized the CORE chapter. [James] Farmer slept in my house many nights.

WC: And Gordon Carey came down in 1960, right after they started, right?

WT: That's correct.

WC: And Dr. [George] Simkins had called him down.

WT: That's right. And that was sort of ironical, too. George has always been sort of a maverick, his own man. And even though he was president—I guess he still is—of the adult branch of the NAACP, he did not let that stop him in terms of what he wanted to do in reference to the sit-ins.

WC: Right, because the night after they started, the local chapter endorsed them.

WT: That's correct.

WC: Yeah, yeah. So it was only after that when the national—oh, and maybe the state chapter, organization, too—then started to put—

WT: If you will recall even nationally, Roy Wilkins, it took him awhile before he actually endorsed these types of ideas. I just don't remember the timetables involved. But I do know that it was frowned upon by the NAACP at that time. We did not receive any support from the state or national level.

WC: So you had—you must have been active in the youth chapter then from '57-'58 on?

WT: That's right, up through, I think, my sophomore year, junior year in high school. That's when the sit-ins broke out. Initially they would not permit the high school students to participate, then things snowballed. So they figured it would be over by the time school was out, but it wasn't and they didn't want it to die. And that's when they solicited, you know, our support, and it was actually the local students that carried the thing on to fruition.

WC: Right, after the semester ended.

WT: After it was over, throughout that summer and in the following year.

WC: Do you remember Reverend Edmonds at all, Edwin Edmonds?

WT: I know of him. I don't really know him—is it Dr. Edmonds?

WC: Yeah. He's a minister, I guess, and a—

WT: He taught somewhere, too, I believe.

WC: Yeah, he taught at Bennett [College].

WT: Yeah, taught at Bennett.

WC: And he headed up the NAACP from '55 to '57, when he was sort of nudged out of Greensboro.

WT: Right. I have vague memories of that. He had a couple of daughters, one was Karen Edmonds.

WC: Yeah, and they're now in New Haven [Connecticut]. But he seemed to have a lot to do with revitalizing that youth chapter in his role there during that period, two or three years.

WT: You could probably talk with a David Dansby. I think that he was involved during that time. Again, that's a bit before me. I might have the dates a little bit mixed up. I may have been closer to—that was '66 when I [unclear]. It was five years from '61—My involvement with the youth chapter may have been closer to '58-'59, right prior to these sit-ins.

WC: Had you known Ezell Blair [Jr.—now Jibreel Khazan] and David Richmond and those guys before?

WT: I knew them all my life. Ezell and David—

WC: Oh, you'd known them all your life.

WT: Yeah. Ezell and David, but not Joe McNeil or Franklin [McCain], because they were migrants into A&T. But Ezell and David grew up here.

WC: I'm going to see Ezell tomorrow night—actually, Thursday night. I've interviewed him once but I'm going to see him again, in Bedford. Now, so you were already an activist when those first sit-ins started. What made you join the youth chapter of the NAACP? Do you remember any of those series of events that had happened that—

WT: No. You know—I don't know. I guess it was something that's instilled in you based on your total experience. From home to school you were always taught to assert yourself and that nothing is given to you, and that was basically my philosophy. It has been, and basically it still is.

WC: Right.

WT: I don't remember who sold me my first youth membership.

WC: Yeah. Were there teachers who were—particular teachers who you remember as being important in your life?

WT: Yeah, you've mentioned several. Nell Coley in her own way. She was not a rah-rah-rah civil rights person, but she had a strange type of concern for her students. You don't have to tell someone something directly in order for them to really have an understanding of what you're saying. I guess among the high school teachers, I'd probably say Nell. College teachers, I remember Darwin Turner at A&T. Zoe Barbee was a very dynamic woman; she's dead now.

Dr. [Lewis] Dowdy played a very key role under an enormous amount of pressure. He was actually acting president [of A&T] at the time. [Samuel] Proctor left. And from what I understand, Proctor did not sanction what was going on. I don't know if you've gotten this from anyone else or not. But it was my understanding that he did not sanction it. He was at the time in the Peace Corps, I believe, or decided to travel. And Dowdy had tremendous pressure placed upon him, but he never tried to transfer that pressure to the students or change [unclear]. It was, you know, state schools and all those ramifications.

Dr. [Willa] Player was a very dynamic woman. She totally supported the Bennett students to the point where she told them, "Look, don't worry about anything. This is your commitment. This is what I want you to do." I would say basically the Bennett girls carried the movement for a long period of time.

WC: I saw her about a month ago.

WT: Oh, really?

WC: She was very—I think she enjoyed remembering those experiences, and she was eloquent in talking about them.

WT: Did she tell you about the occasion that she had when she went down to the polio hospital to see those girls when the A&T students had been tricked out?

WC: Yes, and she wouldn't let them leave.

WT: Well, she told them that they didn't have to leave.

WC: Right.

WT: To stay as long as they felt like that they should stay. You know, her outward appearance would not lead one to believe during that time that she would be that type of dynamic person. But, you know, she was a protégé of Ben[jamin Elijah] Mays [and helped people? And she was a very strong woman.

WC: Made of steel. I understand that Dean [Glenn F.] Rankin was not supportive of you. At least I've gotten that from a couple of sources. Is that your perception?

WT: I knew Dean Rankin. I didn't have any pressure on me. When you say supportive, I think that he was probably supportive in his own way. You've got to understand the pressures that different characters had on them at the time. He never attempted to apply any pressure on any of us to do anything. At the same time, you would not find him in a picket line. That was not his role. And I think once you start any type of role analysis, you could probably say 60, 70% of people in those type of positions were not overtly supportive. They felt threatened. And at the time I think that I would have been one of the first ones to receive that type of pressure, but I have never felt that pressure from him.

I think the ministers—a lot of the ministers were less supportive than—when they could have been. I'm more critical of them because of their independence or what they should have had as independence. We threatened to picket churches. Rev. [Lorenzo] Lynch's church, we threatened to picket it.

WC: That—

WT: Providence Baptist Church. Because he was afraid for us to meet at his church, and we would have picketed it.

WC: He didn't let Dr. [Martin Luther] King speak there either.

WT: I don't think so. Dr. Robinson was—he and Donald Addison were very vocal. They were faculty members at the time at A&T. Darwin Turner was very vocal. You should probably talk with Lewis Brandon. Have you?

WC: I haven't yet. I have his name as someone I'd like to talk to.

WT: Yeah, Lewis has been around A&T for awhile. [unclear]

WC: Is he still running the bookstore?

WT: Yeah. Of course, he teaches over at A&T, too.

WC: Yeah, I would like to talk to him.
How did it start? How did the '63 movement start?

WT: Accident, like most things in history. You're speaking in terms of sit-ins?

WC: Yeah.

WT: Well, I'm sure you've been told this story a number of times. From what I understand, I don't know if the four—Ezell, Joe, Frank and David—went downtown together or not, I guess they did. And probably just out of a prank, you know, they decided they were going to sit down; probably noticed the reaction. It was a snowball type reaction. The timing was right. It was an accident. I mean, how do you create something like that? They had no idea it was going to develop into what it did.

WC: But then there were the second set of sit-ins that you were more directly involved in.

WT: That was just a continuation. You see, it had all started there. We—we are basically crisis-oriented people. When I say we, I'm not only talking about black people, I mean Americans period. And we had something going at the time. It developed from one thing to another. It expanded. We left Woolworth's and Kress. We started going to S&W Cafeteria, Mayfair Cafeteria. We started economic action. We started political action. Our demands broadened. We got more participation. And if you notice at the time, initially, Jesse Jackson was not involved.

WC: Right.

WT: I can remember when we sort of tricked him into getting involved. But it was a snowball type of thing. The entire concept just broadened.

WC: Do you remember the day that you and Robert ["Pat"] Patterson and Tony Stanley went to McDonald's?

WT: Yeah, very much so.

WC: What happened that day? I know that it happened, but I don't know any more than that. Was that one of the first times that you took part in—does that stand out in your memory as being early on in your involvement?

WT: No, not really I don't think. Let me see, my involvement actually started during the summer. I think I had graduated from high school, and that was the first summer that the sit-ins ended. During that summer, I guess about fifteen, twenty, twenty-five, thirty students manned picket lines. We did whatever we could to, you might say, have a holding pattern until the college students got back. One day we walked picket lines. We started economic boycotts in the entire downtown area, because we recognized then that the merchants had a responsibility to exert whatever pressure they could to get these things integrated if they in fact were going to take our money. We passed out leaflets. We started a door-to-door campaign where we tried to educate people as to what we were attempting to do. That was the first involvement.

Then when the students got back, I was then a freshman at A&T. I was elected chairman of CORE. That's when we started to expand in terms of our demands. We had dialogue with some committee that was set up downtown. I know one of the fellows, Don Guyes [sic, Leonard Guyes or Don Prego] of Prego-Guyes [women's store], he was on the committee—a young guy and fairly moderate at the time. I don't really recall the other merchants that were involved. Terry Sanford's whole atmosphere helped, too. You know, he had—we could get to his ear whenever we needed to.

But in terms of what my first involvement in terms of actually sitting-in somewhere, I don't even remember.

WC: It's not important. I thought maybe that episode—

WT: What I remember about that McDonald's thing, I think that was the first time we got the athletes involved, including Jesse Jackson, and that helped to snowball the movement because of their image.

WC: And Jesse wasn't ready to do that until you persuaded him?

WT: No. That's right. And it seems as though, Pat, Tony, and I went out there. And if I recall correctly, they refused to serve us, and then we went back to campus and brought a whole group out there. And that's, I think, when we were able to get the athletes involved in the thing. That was the significance of that, if I remember correctly.

WC: Yeah. How did you get? I gather that at least in the long run, Jackson's involvement was important.

WT: It was, because of his own dynamic nature. I'm not a dynamic individual in terms of speaking. I don't have charisma. I think Jesse had that. He enjoyed it. I didn't give a damn, other than using the press as a tool, whether or not my picture was in the paper or not, but Jesse thrived off of that, even as a student. And this was during the era of King. He started to try to pattern himself after King. He wrote a "Letter from a Greensboro Jail" patterned after "[Letter from a] Birmingham Jail," you know, and it just fit right in. It was a conscious effort on our part to try to get anyone that had any type of positive image with other students, with people, involved so we could continue the snowball effect. That was all the pressure that we had.

We recognized early that if we were going to negotiate, we had to have some type leverage. Our only leverage was to disrupt the economic flow of that community, so where they had to sit down and talk to us as equals. If not, we were begging, we were not bargaining. There is a difference when you talk about your power. We had several different types of power. You disrupt the entire downtown area with bodies. We had economic power in terms of withdrawing a dollar. We had economic power in terms of filling up jails in Greensboro. We literally did that. It cost them an enormous amount of money to keep us there, till the point where they tricked us out. We recognized that. And that's what we were attempting to do, and I think we were successful and were able to keep violence down.

WC: Were you in at that time that the A&T students were deceived into coming out? Were you negotiating at that point or were you in jail?

WT: I was negotiating. I couldn't afford to go to jail. I wish I could have. I could have gotten some rest.

WC: [laughter]

WT: That was the easy part.

WC: You always—you and Tony and some other people always tried to stay out so leadership would remain intact.

WT: Somebody had to. There were enough symbolic leaders in to where people didn't feel that they were giving their bodies, you know. We had free access. We could walk in and out of jail when we got ready—when I say we, I'm talking about Tony and myself—because they knew that we were basically controlling the situation. Captain [William] Jackson and I had an excellent rapport. I was a Greensboro boy. He couldn't stand Jesse Jackson. Jesse was an outsider, and we used that. You know, we used it to project his

image and create—we had to actually create confrontations, you know, because we didn't have fire hoses. Nobody was beaten, so we had to create confrontation. And that was one of the big confrontations that we created when we made them drag Jesse Jackson out of the church praying. We had the press there. Thirty minutes later we had ten thousand leaflets out on the street, and that rejuvenated the whole movement.

WC: And you had the leaflets ready before he was arrested.

WT: Right.

WC: So that there was a, in a sense—the beneficence of the Greensboro image was a detriment to you because you had to—

WT: It made it harder in order to get the type of reaction we needed to sustain that type of movement.

WC: Your power was the bodies that you could mobilize, and you need an issue to mobilize them around.

WT: That's right. And we had to constantly create issues in order to sustain the type of power that we felt that we needed to, you know, get the victories.

WC: Right. A while ago you said that the Bennett girls—Bennett women were the backbone of the movement.

WT: That's right.

WC: Why do you say that?

WT: Because they did not have numbers, but they were always there. And I think if you studied it, probably in any history—I mean any area, just looking at pictures you would always see more women involved than men. I don't really know why, but it was a fact. I mean I can remember the time when we marched downtown with fifty women and maybe ten men, if that many. Our picket line was basically manned by women. I don't really know; something just came across my mind, in terms of Bennett: Bennett had more of a middle-class type of student body than A&T, and maybe that exposure may have had something to do with it. I really don't know. But I know many nights, if we didn't have those Bennett girls, I believe we would not have had anybody out there.

WC: Now, you were dating one of those.

WT: That's right.

WC: One of those women. And Tony Stanley's fiancée was—

WT: That's right.

WC: —was one of them. Do you remember the night that you brought them back on campus after hours and you had to go to Dr. Player's house?

WT: Yeah.

WC: That's a story which Tony told me that, but she remembered it. [laughter] She enjoyed talking about that again.

WT: We had an excellent relationship with Dr. Player and also the dean of women. There were security guards over there. During that time, Bennett women were not supposed to ride in cars, but in order for us to do what we were doing, it was just impossible. So we would go right on campus and pick them up and bring them back, but it was no hanky-panky. It was all business.

WC: We've been talking about you and Tony Stanley and Jesse Jackson and we've mentioned Robert Patterson. One of the things I'd like to try to define is who the core group was. You said earlier that you and Tony didn't do any time because they knew that you were not only leading, but also controlling. Were you two essentially the generals of the movement?

WT: I would say centrally, but let me define a little further. Lewis Brandon, [unclear] he has been involved since he came to A&T, and he's still involved. Pat Patterson to some extent, but not to the same extent, I don't think. Jesse in terms of public image, but not in terms of the nuts and bolts. Ballard—at the bank, what's his name?

WC: Battle.

WT: Battle, B. J.

WC: B. J. Battle, yeah.

WT: He was involved. Otis Hairston has always been involved and a great amount of support. I would say in terms of the nucleus, that was probably it. And then Reverend [Cecil] Bishop was there; he was quite involved.

WC: Now, there was a coordinating council, which as I understand it at least—and I get this I guess from both Bishop and Hairston—involved Dr. Simkins, Rev. Hairston, Rev. Bishop and maybe Vance Chavis.

WT: I don't think Vance—

WC: Maybe Father [sic—Reverend Richard] Hicks?

WT: Father Hicks was involved.

WC: And they've said that you were the student representative on that coordinating council.

WT: We forced them to recognize us. They went downtown and attempted to negotiate without the students. I think—was [mayor] Carson Blaine [sic] in there?

WC: Carson Bain, yeah.

WT: Okay. We sent them a telegram and told them, "You will notice you have very few adults in the street. And if you want these streets empty, you better talk to us, because the people that are there are not the ones here." And that's how we forced them to recognize our leadership. We were not going to permit the old guard—while we did not mind working with them—to come in and usurp what we were trying to do. Because they weren't—they didn't have their bodies out there. And we forced them to recognize the youthful leadership, to let you know that these people that you want to talk to are not the ones controlling the situation.

WC: So that there was a tension there.

WT: Yeah.

WC: For quite awhile?

WT: What, between the adults?

WC: Yeah.

WT: Not really. It wasn't a tension once they understood what was going on. And once they became aware of it, they were supportive. Because we made it clear it was not going to be that old patriarchal type of thing. This is the new day. This is not what we're all about. And we really didn't have any—I mean once we cleaned it out and hashed it out in a room with the adults, they understood where we were coming from. In fact, some of them refused to participate unless there was adequate student representation. Because they recognized it, too. They couldn't make any decision, it was [unclear]. And we were prepared to go public if in fact they continued to want to address themselves like that.

WC: Yeah. Do you remember who it was who would have stood up and said, "We will not participate unless you—unless the young people—?" Who would have been the ones who were—?

WT: Those people that you mentioned were pretty progressive. George has always been a key supporter—Father Hicks, Otis Hairston, Bishop, you know, we never really had any problem with them. We had disagreements. We'd disagree with the whites. We had strategy disagreements. They were older. They went a little slower. We were young bucks. We were ready to go. And we had to have compromises. You know, you can't expect someone that had the experience that they had in their station in life to react to a situation the same way that the students would react. It's [unclear]. And I don't really see that as a divisive thing. I'm sure we learned a great deal from them. But for their wisdom, who knows where this would have gone—and their finances and the use of their facilities. And many of them did march and many of them did go to jail.

WC: I keep on hearing a story—I've heard it from two or three places—that there came a time in the demonstrations when a lot of people—a lot of the white people in the community were waiting for school to end and hoping that when school ended, everything would calm down, and kept on claiming that this was just really an outside—

WT: A bunch of outsiders, that's correct.

WC: And that that message kept on coming across and helped to galvanize—

WT: Local community support.

WC: —more participation by the local community, yeah.

WT: And it took a lot of work. There was an educational process. We knocked on doors, we held church meetings, we held neighborhood meetings, and we got the message across. I mean we had everyone from doctors, lawyers, schoolteachers, everyone participating.

WC: There is a reference, I guess, that I've heard a couple of times, to one particular march where everyone participated. Just one of my concerns is to try to pinpoint that. I guess my sense is now that there was a silent march when everyone participated

WT: This was the one that preceded Jesse's arrest?

WC: I think so.

WT: If I remember what happened, we had people going to jail everywhere, and this was supposed to have been a silent march down to the courthouse [unclear] et cetera. So Jesse and I were leading the march, and we marched up in front of the courthouse. And when we got there, we gave the signal for everybody to sit down. In fact, I actually admit that some people sat down in the middle of the street and started blocking the streets. Captain Jackson got on his bullhorn and gave us so many minutes to disperse. My order was for them to arrest, so we just sat there. So Jesse led us in prayer—prayed for everybody from the mayor, the police force—about a two or three minute prayer. After that we lined up peacefully, got back on the sidewalks and marched back to the church, had a big meeting.

The next morning I was on my way up to our headquarters—that was at Father Hicks' church [Episcopal Church of the Redeemer] at the time—and I ran into Captain Jackson. And he wanted to know—he called me Willie—he said, “Willie, have you seen that Jackson boy?”

I said, “Not since last evening.” So I asked, “What's the problem?”

He said, “Well, I have a warrant for his arrest.”

And I said “for what?”

He said “for inciting a riot.”

[laughter] So that's what preceded that whole thing with Jesse. I said, “Well, Captain, I haven't seen him today. As soon as I see him, I'll give you a call.”

We got busy and prepared our leaflets and persuaded Jesse that he was going to have to be the sacrificial lamb. This was the impetus that we needed, and he'd have to give of his body and spend a few days in jail. And we had national press coverage at the time. We carried him up to the church, had him on his knees praying, had the cameras rolling, and they came in and drug him out and put him in jail. The leaflets read, “Your great leader has been arrested.” That's what really threw him into the limelight. And this again was about the time or shortly thereafter when King had written his “Letter from a Birmingham Jail.” Jesse wrote a “Letter from a Greensboro Jail,” indicting everybody. He stayed in jail two or three days, but it really served as a catalyst in terms of bringing the community out in support of the students, because at that time we probably had just about as many students involved that we could [have at the time?].

Dick Ramsey, did his name come up? He was with American Friends [Service Committee].

WC: AFSC, yeah.

WT: Charlie Davis?

WC: Charlie—Yeah, Charlie Davis from AFSC. Yeah. I've just been—that's where I've been all morning is reading their—going through their papers in Philadelphia on Greensboro in the fifties and sixties. It's very interesting stuff. They've got some good documents there on their work during that period. Yeah. Now Ramsey was white, and Davis is black.

WT: That's right.

WC: Did you ever have any sense there were any informers in your group?

WT: Not really. Not in Greensboro. We weren't threatened. At the time you were fearful of whatever because this whole thing was new. But we weren't really concerned about that. Our concern along that line was probably getting more people involved and people that we felt should have been in positions to actually be involved, such as certain ministers and other adult leadership. But in terms of informers, that never really bothered us.

WC: Well, I haven't seen any evidence of it, I just wondered whether—I have seen evidence of it in other situations, and so I just wondered whether you ever had any sense of that.

WT: We weren't really doing anything that was secretive.

WC: Right.

WT: I mean we weren't plotting to bomb anybody.

WC: I was just—when I was in Washington yesterday, I was talking to a guy in the Intelligence Committee, and they've got so much stuff about the way in which the FBI did—

WT: I'm sure I've got a record yea long.

WC: —of the way they did the Panthers in Winston-Salem, totally infiltrated and manipulated.

WT: Yeah, but see, the one thing that we tried to do—and I think I learned a long time ago, and I try to carry it now—if I threaten somebody, I'm going to try damn well to carry it through. You only have to do that once. If I tell them that tomorrow we're going to have a thousand people down here blocking the streets, I had a thousand people down there. That created respect for you. Next time a threat would do the same thing; I didn't have to do it. Once they realized that, it was a totally different ballgame.

WC: In terms of negotiations, who were the people that you would have dealt with in the city besides the police? Did you deal with [David] Schenck very much? I've seen some of the things that—those newsletters that you wrote.

WT: Yeah, but it's been so long. The police, in terms of negotiation, was very minor. The only thing we did with them was negotiating a way to get all these records clean, after everything was over. The tedious negotiation was in terms of working out employment agreements with certain department stores, working out plans in which we integrated the eating facilities without any violence at all. And it took a long period of time. The mayor was involved, but he—I had very little respect for him, Mayor Schenck. I think he had a false type of leadership. And he nearly missed an excellent opportunity, I think, to really exert himself in such a way where he could have almost been a Terry Sanford in Greensboro, but he was not. Maybe he just didn't have the stature.

WC: There is some interesting correspondence between Schenck and Sanford in Sanford's papers—the governor's papers. I mean Schenck was running scared, didn't know how to handle it.

WT: He really didn't, and he wouldn't listen to anybody.

WC: Did you ever have any dealings with Zane, Edward R. Zane?

WT: I remember the name. I can't place him. I sort of remember him as liberal.

WC: He's an older man who was with Burlington Industries.

WT: I believe he may have been one of the ones that applied some pressure on the local community. There was a lawyer there, too. What's his name? Mac something—

WC: McNeill Smith.

WT: Yes. McNeill Smith, in his very low-keyed way, played an influential role in terms of bringing about a peaceful solution to this thing.

WC: And how would he do that?

WT: I can remember having meetings in his office. What the details of those meetings were, at this time, I just don't know. I don't really know what his role was. I know it was a positive role.

WC: But a behind-the-scenes and quiet role?

WT: Yeah, [worked with?] the newspaper type thing.

WC: You know he's running for the senate now, and it's going to very, very interesting to see what happens. So that who—I mean did you think—obviously if Schenck didn't have the power to—

WT: Politicians are basically [fraternizers?] of the local community, and I don't think that anyone really respected them. That's the reason we directed our attention to merchants. We felt that that was a power base in Greensboro—you know, your local merchants, your industrial giants. He was a figurehead for them, and I'm sure that they could put pressure on him to [unclear]

WC: The Cones—were the Cones important? Did they get involved?

WT: Not in [our thing?] Not as I know of. I'm sure that somebody is talking to them. With that much money and power, I'm sure somebody had to be talking to them. But they—if they played a role, it was very behind the scenes.

WC: I heard somewhere the story that the Cones owned the building that S&W [Cafeteria] was in.

WT: That may be true. I don't know.

WC: Put some pressure on—I guess S&W—Boyd Morris was Mayfair [Cafeteria], wasn't he?

WT: Mayfair, yeah.

WC: That they put some pressure on that way. I never heard any—I don't have any confirmation for that, it's just one of those rumors.

WT: You could check—get a lawyer to check.

WC: Deeds I guess, yeah. I'm interested also in the [Ku Klux] Klan. Did—

WT: That never bothered us in Greensboro. I never saw a white hood in Greensboro.

WC: Yeah. Would someone like [George] Dorsett, would you just sort of see him downtown? Would you know who he and his cohorts were in the Klan?

WT: I remember vaguely some white agitators, but see I don't think that—

[Recording paused]

WC: —he was an FBI informant. And—

WT: I don't really remember him.

WC: [unclear]

WT: Does Tony remember him?

WC: A little bit, a little bit. One of the things I've been trying to check out in Washington was just how much information I can get of a hard nature on Dorsett's work for the FBI all the time he was heading the Klan in Greensboro. It's an interesting story, which I guess we will never know all of, but it's fascinating.

So you were at that point a sophomore when most of this was going on. I guess one of the things that puzzles me a little bit is that—at least my sense is that once the settlement was arrived at, there then seems to be a period of three or four years when there's relative peace. Now whether that peace means an absence of protest, I'm not sure.

WT: Well, what that peace meant again was, when I said we were [unclear], we had achieved certain physical, overt goals. We had the right to eat a hamburger. We had a few salespersons in some of the clothing stores. We had achieved those types of goals. Therefore the crisis was over, but the real work began. And we had people working there. My brother was very active in this phase of it—the whole political phase of organizing people to register to vote. We continued our community-type of meetings trying to put other types of economic pressures on them.

But I think what happened then was reflective of what's happening in our society now. The issues that we are confronted with are so diversified it's hard to rally enough people around them for any type of protest. We're in a different arena now. And I think we moved into that arena in Greensboro much faster than we did in other parts of the

country. It's almost the exact same issues you have in any other city. Whether you're talking about housing, jobs, you're talking about the whole economic thing, you're talking about moving into "the mainstream," and you don't do that through marching, necessarily.

WC: Right. A different kind of organization.

WT: I think that that's what happened. You know, we never had a lot of police brutality in Greensboro that we knew about. It just wasn't had here.

WC: Did you have close ties with John Marshall Stevenson [now Kilimanjaro]?

WT: Yeah, I knew John Marshall very well. That's someone I should've named, too. John was not that active in an organizational sense, but he was popular and of the more outspoken individuals.

WC: He seems to have been absolutely crucial in the late sixties.

WT: Yeah. And he suffered from it. I understand he had enormous pressures placed upon him. I don't really understand the [unclear]. I don't know if his relationship with the school or pressures in terms of his newspaper or what, but I understand that he did in fact suffer from his [unclear].

WC: I've had a long—I had a long, very long interview with him. It was an incredibly emotional experience and I was worried after it, actually. I thought he was almost at the point of a nervous breakdown because there were so many things tearing at him. But he keeps on—just keeps on striving.

WT: That's right.

WC: Just is an incredible difference, I think—he's made an incredible difference. Did you have—before you left—you left Greensboro as soon as you graduated?

WT: That's right. I left Greensboro the end of my junior year. I came to New York and went to CCNY [City College of New York] and I went—I stayed up here a year, then I went back the second semester of the following year and finished. I just would have lost too many credits by transferring up to CCNY, so I went back that second semester to finish my undergraduate work. And I left, like, a week thereafter.

WC: Was that just because you wanted a different kind of environment?

WT: No, I left looking for employment at the time. In fact, I went up to Newberry and worked [unclear]. I couldn't afford to go to law school at the time. And did that for about a year, got a fellowship to NYU [New York University], a Martin Luther King Fellowship in public administration. I was trying to use that as a substitute for going to law school. I went one semester [and decided] no, that's not what I want, and that's when I made up my mind I was going to law school. And I came down to Rutgers [University], and I've been here in New Jersey since.

WC: Did you know people like Napoleon—Nelson Johnson?

WT: Only vaguely, when I go back. I met them. Henry Frye, in his own quiet ways, has always been very active [unclear]. Henry was not “a rabble rouser” type, but he has always been very supportive in all that I do.

WC: The picture I have —

WT: Do you know Jack [Ives?]

WC: Is he still around?

WT: Yeah. He's a very quiet type of lawyer. He's attorney for the savings and loan association [unclear].

WC: He's in the same firm with Kenneth Lee?

WT: I don't know if they have a firm. I don't know their association. They have been associated in the past. [unclear] Really sort of a different motive.

WC: He's been involved in a very different kind of thing, but seems to have done incredibly well or provided very strong leadership. Well, I think that I have asked you all the questions that I really wanted to ask you. Maybe you have some questions you want to ask me some more? [laughs]

WT: Not really. I'd just be interested in seeing the finished product.

WC: Right, definitely. I'll make sure you get a copy of it. I'll shut this off. It's going to be a book—

[Recording paused]

WT: —for what you're talking about—Sanford's relationship to the Kennedys. Proctor was on leave from A&T. The year before this happened—no, maybe he was still president. He was acting president. Proctor starting to try his [unclear]—started to try his relationship to the Kennedys and the Kennedys' relationship to Sanford.

WC: It's all there in a nice little package. You don't have to have telegrams. You just have to know who's related to who. [laughs]

WT: That's right.

WC: When you were in that room with Dr. Dowdy when he told you he was going to have to do that, or he was going to do that, I understand that he was very, very ambivalent about that. He didn't want to do it.

WT: He didn't. And I guess that's one reason I still have the utmost respect for him. But even at the time, even though I was a student, I understood the pressures that were on him. And he felt at the time that he had to do it for the overall good of the institution. And I mean basically that's what he told us. He said, "I have a job to do, and you have a job to do. My job is this, and you know what your job is." How much more could you ask for? Because it could've been done totally different. But then he would've had problems, too, because he didn't want the students rebelling against him.

WC: It could've just totally blown up—

WT: That's right.

WC: —and the whole school could've been destroyed.

WT: That's right.

[End of Interview]