

CIVIL RIGHTS GREENSBORO DIGITAL ARCHIVE PROJECT

William Henry Chafe Oral History Collection

INTERVIEWEE: Otis Hairston

INTERVIEWER: William Chafe

DATE: 1977

[Redacted conversation about getting in touch with an unidentified person.]

WILLIAM CHAFE: Dave Richmond and, at that time, Ezell Blair Jr., they were both members of your church weren't they?

OTIS HAIRSTON: Yeah, Dave came here. He was not—of course, he had not married. He was courting.

WC: Right, yeah. Was Franklin McCain a member of your church, too?

OH: No, no, he was not. He was from out of town. I don't think he—He was a student, of course. I don't think he joined the church while he was a student here in town.

WC: One of the things that—I remember your saying that you were the head of the membership drive for the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] in '58 or '59.

OH: Yes, in '59 and '60.

WC: I wondered whether you remembered during that year how many—you said that at the end of that year, I think, that the membership reached a new high.

OH: Yes, we had over two thousand. Of course, it was not my effort or my leadership. The time was right for it, the interest, because of the movement.

WC: That's right, yeah. So by the time you finished as membership chairman, it had gotten to two thousand?

OH: Yes, we led the state for two years, '59 and '60. We led the state [unclear]. We led for two years.

WC: Now how much did that increase during your time?

OH: It doubled. It over doubled.

WC: It more than doubled, so it would have been about a thousand in '57 or '56, and then it moved to two thousand by 1960-'61?

OH: In '60 it moved up to about twenty-three hundred, above the two thousand. The year—the fiscal year is through—from June to the first of July, I believe.

WC: Now, I know that you were in Raleigh until, what, '58?

OH: Yes, '58. I came here in '58.

WC: Had Reverend [Edwin] Edmonds already left by the time you came back?

OH: He left—he left—I came in the summer, and he accepted a job away in the fall of the year. He left Bennett [College]. He was here only, in fact, two or three months.

WC: Of that fall when you were still here?

OH: Yes.

WC: Was it your impression that he had done a lot to revitalize the NAACP while he was here?

OH: Yes, this was my impression after I had moved here: that he had done a lot, been very active moving out into the community from the college.

WC: He was succeeded then by Dr. [George] Simkins?

OH: That's correct.

WC: So that I guess one could say then that the middle and late fifties was a period of substantial growth in the NAA?

OH: Yes. I was in Raleigh, but I read about Greensboro '55 to about '62.

WC: And has the membership remained stable since then, or has it gone down?

OH: It has gone down, but it would still be above the normal membership in the state—a city the size of Greensboro, I guess, like Charlotte.

WC: Are you still actively involved?

OH: Yes, I am on the board. I have been on the board ever since then.

WC: Who is the—Is Dr. Simkins still president?

OH: Yes, still president.

WC: I do want to go back and talk with him again. Now, you grew up in Greensboro, isn't that correct?

OH: Yes, this is my home church. I succeeded my father.

WC: I'm sure he'd be very proud of what you've done with it.

OH: I guess he'd be surprised at this building. I don't think he ever conceived the church would ever have a building of this kind.

WC: Did it always have the kind of social services you provide now?

OH: Well, the church has always been active in the community, involved in the community, but new kinds of programs, of course, to meet the needs of this day. We started—that lady who was here yesterday for a dinner, the senior citizens—we have a senior citizens group. We had a dinner yesterday, and the lady who organized the group in the church, who was employed by the church at the time, was here, and we were talking about the different kinds of things that we started ten years ago, like enrichment programs for youth, which was somewhat new, for under privileged kids around the community in the summer months, and a lot of churches have picked it up. The tutoring that we did way back there for folks who had reading problems. And of course, the senior citizens program, where you bring these ladies—mostly ladies; we can't get the men out—but they have sewing and arts and crafts. A lot of churches are doing this kind of thing, but she was saying that really at that time there weren't too many doing this kind of thing.

WC: Is this the largest black church in Greensboro?

OH: No, United Institutional [Baptist Church], as far as membership. The building, I think, would be the largest. But the membership—

WC: And how many members do you have now?

OH: We have about 917.

WC: That's a big congregation.

OH: They have over a thousand, United Institutional.

WC: When you were growing up—when you were growing up in the—and I guess you probably were growing up in the thirties, is that right?

OH: Yes, in the twenties and thirties.

WC: I guess one of the things that I'm interested in doing more with is what was going on in the thirties in Greensboro?

OH: Well, not too much at that time. I can't recall any movement at that time in Greensboro. I think it was after I went to college that we started an effort in Raleigh because of several teachers at Shaw [University], and I think it spread to Greensboro. But I think this was started in Raleigh where two or three teachers talked in their classes occasionally about going to then segregated—going up to—discriminated—going to the movies, upstairs, they call it the peanut gallery. And as a result of this we had a movement at Shaw that almost wrecked the balcony of the movies because blacks stopped, as an effort to organize. Then it moved to Greensboro. I know that some of the students at A&T [now North Carolina A&T State University]—I would come back—but I think the movement started in Raleigh among the students there.

WC: There was a boycott of a theatre downtown during the thirties, wasn't there?

OH: That was later. That movement started in Raleigh.

WC: In Raleigh, and then that came here.

OH: You know how college students just like the sit-ins and pick up?

WC: Sure, yeah. Vance Chavis was involved in that, I think.

OH: Yes, Vance Chavis. He—Vance Chavis, he probably—I think he was at North Carolina Central [University] at Durham, and then he came back to Greensboro. Oh, yes. They had picked it up in Durham, and I think in Greensboro. Vance Chavis, of course, I think was perhaps the leader and initiated this type of thing in Greensboro.

WC: Do you remember when the first time was that a black ran for public office in Greensboro?

OH: I believe I was not here. I was away in school. Reverend Sharp—

WC: Sharp. A.C. Sharp?

OH: Sharp was the first. Robert, I believe—R-something, I believe. I believe he was the first one, as I recall.

WC: And he was a minister, is that correct?

OH: Yes, and a funeral director. I believe he was the first one. Of course, he was not successful. There was somebody else—

WC: Would that have been in the thirties?

OH: That would have been in the thirties, yes—late thirties. There was a Dr. [William] Hampton. [phone rings] In the forties, I think, he ran.

WC: And Reverend [Julius T.] Douglas?

OH: Maybe—Yes, Rev. Douglas ran after Dr. Hampton, I believe. I think Dr. Hampton was the second one, as I recall. He was successful. I believe there could have been somebody between the two, but he was successful, of course, and led the ticket during the primary. Of course, he served—they convinced him to serve on the school board to keep from leading the ticket. If he had run again, I think he would have led the ticket. It was embarrassing because it had always been practice that the person who led the ticket would be the mayor of the city. Now, I don't know. I knew Dr. Hampton, but I have the feeling that they convinced him, after Dr. [David] Jones retired from the school board, that we can't find anybody else; you're the person to go on. I think they convinced him perhaps he would be more valuable, and he probably considered to serve on the school

board. He got off city council. But I had the feeling that perhaps he didn't want to be embarrassed, because I was at Dr. Hampton's funeral service. I was here.

WC: Which was right after the sit-ins, as I understand it.

OH: Yes, he was involved in the early part. He—one of the—his name was signed to a letter that we sent to the mayor of the city during that time. I remember the mayor of the city said at his funeral service that Dr. Hampton was perhaps the best [student?] that you'd ever had—that he'd ever had on the council. He would have his briefcase and had folders, and they'd start talking about water problems. He'd say, "Well, here's how a city the size of Greensboro solved their problem." He did his homework, and before they had never had anybody to do homework like that on the council. He would spend a day—an afternoon every week—studying city government, just going up to the—so that he would be familiar with the operation. And he was—whenever something came up, he always had something to offer. He mentioned that, see. He'd never seen a person on the council who had done his homework like Dr. Hampton had. He was always prepared for a meeting, and I think folks respected him as a result. And I think that if he had run again, I think he would have led the ticket because folks forgot about the black at that time, and I don't think they wanted this to happen. This was my feeling.

WC: That makes a lot of sense, because he certainly would have been—

OH: He was so highly respected, if you came to a council meeting—and here's a man who folks sitting around the table—and they don't know what to—just more or less give an opinion. He says, "Well, this is the way they solved the problem. A city the size of Greensboro had their water problem, this is what they did." Talk about something else. He pulls out his folder. He'd done his research. I think this type of thing impressed anybody at that time.

WC: He—I guess he served on the school board for five years before he died.

OH: Yes.

WC: He was still on the school board, I guess, at the time he died. Was that a sudden—

OH: Yes. I have a check—he was our physician. And I had been to his office three days before he died, and the check cleared the day he died. I saved that check. I still have it. It was sudden. He had done a lot of things that day and came home, and I think his wife said he went in the bath and [just stayed there too long?] and she heard a noise, and he had had this heart attack. But he died right after he got into the hospital.

- WC: And the group of you who sent that letter, would that have been the [Greensboro] Citizens Association or the [Greensboro] Men's Club?
- OH: No, no, Dr. Hampton—not too sure who—Chavis—it could be Vance Chavis who initiated that. We had several persons to sign the letter.
- WC: And basically asking for opening up—
- OH: Yes. Dr. [George] Evans I know was one of the persons. Chavis, yes, Chavis. Miller, Dr. [W. Lloyd T.] Miller—because the students requested, after that time—they have six of us that the students requested would serve on the negotiating team with the businesses. They felt that perhaps they ought to have citizens on a team to negotiate. When the Meyer's Department Store opened the lunch counter but would not open the Garden Room, this was one of the issues. I remember we met with the management at Meyer's. I think a committee—I know Vance Chavis was on that, Vance Chavis and Dr. Miller—we could not take them off the list until they opened the Garden Room.
- WC: Right. Now, I know that [pause] that initial sit-in, was it Dave Richmond and Ezell Blair [Jr.—now Jibreel Khazan] who came and asked you if they could use the mimeograph machine?
- OH: Yes, they used the building. Well, Ezell, of course, being a member here, they were afraid. They were not too sure about the attitude of the administration of A&T at that time. So they had to get out some system—work out a system, because after the first day, all of the students wanted to come to the—go downtown. And they had to have a meeting to say, “Well, you can't do it like this. You've got to have organization. That perhaps you go to class, and during your vacant period, a certain number of students can go down at different places.” Of course, they spread it to several places, and they had to get instructions out to students. And they were afraid to go to the college. And Ezell would say, “Well, they had an office at the church. We'll go down there and see if we can use the mimeograph machine, the typewriter.” Of course, they took over the secretary. They even paid for—used up all our paper, and said, “We'll pay you back.” We were glad to do it, of course.
- WC: Did they ever ask you—I mean would Ezell have ever asked you your advice on someone like Mr. [Edward R.] Zane, who seems to have gotten involved very quickly in trying to negotiate with the students? Would he have—?

OH: I'll tell you now, we did not get involved, the adult community, I don't believe. I think the students worked out the—when it came time to negotiate, the students requested that some of us would be involved. I remembered meeting with Mr. Zane. He was one of the persons. As I recall, they had about nine persons on this committee who represented primary citizens of the community, and the students named those persons.

WC: Named the—

OH: Yeah. [unclear—both speaking]

WC: —they wanted to negotiate. Yeah.

OH: I know we had to meet several times with Mr. Zane. I'm not too sure about the students, whether they met Mr. Zane or not. I don't recall.

WC: That's because it was a long time ago. It's almost—it's hard to believe that it was seventeen years ago.

OH: That's right.

WC: [laughs] It's amazing, almost eighteen years ago. You became—Would you say you became more involved over the Garden Room issue than you had been over the Woolworth's and Kress issues?

OH: Yes, this was the real—this was where we had to use pressure. I remember Dr. [Willa] Player, who was president of Bennett College, was the first person who sent a charge plate back to Meyer's. And some of the ladies, the professional groups, had persons to send their charge cards back to Meyer's, and this was the thing that did it. This was the thing that really did it. After that they were over-anxious to try to negotiate. But our feeling was that unless they opened the Garden Room, we couldn't withdraw from Meyer's.

WC: I guess there was an economic boycott in April and May before the settlement—

OH: Yes. This is what the pressure was.

WC: —of both Meyer's and the rest of—there must have been a list of stores that the community was boycotting. Would that be the way it—

OH: This was later, I think. I don't recall, I think Meyer's was the only one.

WC: Another thing that we talked about before was moving ahead into the '63 demonstrations—the '62-'63 demonstrations, when you had a coordinating committee, I understand.

OH: Yes, this is correct.

WC: And you would have been on it, and Reverend [Cecil] Bishop would have been on it, I gather.

OH: No, Rev. Bishop came later. Rev. Bishop—this particular committee, a fellow Hicks, Richard "Dick" Hicks, who was at the [Episcopal] Church of the Redeemer, was president of the minister's group. George Simkins, you know, Dr. Simkins was president of the NAACP. Bill Thomas was president of CORE [Congress on Racial Equality], and I was president of the Citizens Association. I had just moved in.

Frye was president—Henry Frye had just moved in, and it was—I talked to Dr. Simkins about this, what would happen in the community if some of the folks were saying that CORE was too radical. Bill Thomas was president of CORE. Jim Farmer would come in and say, "It's too radical." And you always have this danger of the adult community saying, "We can't follow these students. They're going too far."

So we conceived the idea that what we needed to do was to support—find ways we could support them and have a coordinating committee. Now, McNeill "Mac" Smith played an important role in this. Mac played a very important role in this. McNeill, would call—I was on—he was chairman of the of the Rural—

WC: Federal?

OH: No, the Rural Council of Churches—rural something—rural mission or something—a council, a commission of the—and I was on that and he knew me. So he would call and say to me, "The folks downtown are saying they're not going to let students come to Greensboro and tell them how to run the city." You know, "They're coming to Greensboro. We're not going to let students dictate what we're going to do in Greensboro." And he said, "Some adults need to speak out."

And I remember Mr. Chavis, I think, initiated this: [he] had a statement drawn up, signed by about fifteen or sixteen people representative of the adult community, and released it in the paper. McNeill called up about three or four days after that. McNeill said they had not got the message. [WC laughs] He said, "What will they do?" The students started marching and this type of thing. He said, "What they're going to do, they're going to bring pressure on the administration at the colleges to force them, unless the adult community becomes more involved."

So yes, Rev. Bishop was here at the time. He was not on the coordinating committee. But we talked with some of the ministers and we decided that we needed to organize an adult march to let the community know that the adults support the goals of the students. So we organized this adult march. And as I recall, we must have had about 1,700-1,800 people in that thing. Couldn't get inside of the church, they had the mics on the outside—the old Trinity—Rev. Bishop was pastor of the old Trinity AME [American Methodist Episcopal] Zion Church at the time.

And I remember Captain [William] Jackson, who was the person from the police force assigned to more or less deal with this as far as protection. He said to me one day they're have to try us—try us in some of the courts—I mean court—some of the trials of some of the folks. He said, "You know, I was impressed when I saw Dr. Evans and Dr. Tarpley, former principal of Dudley, participating. I didn't think that it was that widespread. And he said, "And I know that the older adult white community got the message when you had 1,700-1,800 people marching downtown to demonstrate their support." And I think this was the thing which really convinced the community that it was not students coming in from the outside saying that "we want to go anywhere we want to go." I think it was the adult community who said to these folks, "This thing is being supported by adults."

WC: Was that what the march was called the Silent March?

OH: Yes, that's correct.

WC: So that one, as opposed to the others, had that special label, the Silent March? Because I had tried to—

OH: We have never had—we had never had that many folks to participate. We had the principals, they had been very fearful. But I think we had—must have had two-thirds of the doctors. I think all of the lawyers. I know Frye was—he was the federal deputy—what is it?

WC: Attorney?

OH: Yeah, attorney for the—yeah. And he was even involved, and normally he doesn't get into that conflict. They had just about everybody. I think we had twenty-six preachers who led this particular march.

WC: Wow.

OH: So it was—you know they had to be impressed.

WC: Sure enough.

OH: We had folk who were blind; one man walked—had one leg and a cane. It was really organized through the churches. The pastors cooperated. They announced and urged folk that we needed to get out on the street and demonstrate that we were not satisfied, that we supported the goals of the students. I think this was the thing that really impressed the folk that they have to move.

But the mayor of the city was still determined that he would not do anything—Dave Schenck was mayor of the city—that he would not do anything until the students stopped marching. This was his approach. I talked with them. If they stopped, we could negotiate. I remember we were in a session in his office, and he had gotten pretty [warm?] because he had gone out of town on the weekends and the mayor pro tem had to take over. [William] Trotter had to take over. I mean he had to call the group. I know one night at twelve o'clock—on one Sunday morning at twelve o'clock they called and wanted to have an emergency meeting, Trotter had gotten the group together, the mayor pro tem. The mayor was out of the city.

The city was paralyzed in that they had all these folk in jail and they couldn't feed them. It was expensive. And they didn't know what to do, so he had an emergency meeting at twelve o'clock on Sunday morning at the Church of the Redeemer. The mayor of the city got back. His position was, "We'll negotiate when they stop marching. We're not going to do anything." When we were in the session, he got up and he said, "We can cut the water off at A&T and Bennett. We can stop them. They're in the city. We can just cut the water off at their institution and paralyze them."

I said—somewhat so nicely, I said, "Yes, Mr. Mayor, if you do that, then you'll have ten thousand people in the streets of Greensboro, instead of the fifteen or sixteen—but ten thousand people out in the streets of Greensboro."

And he wanted to know if that was a threat. And we said, "If yours is a threat—if you're going to threaten to do this, we're threatening to do this. This is a threat."

And I used to tease him. Later on I was on the board of the chamber and he was on the board. We used to sit together. I'd say, "Is that a threat, Mr. Mayor?" [laughter] And he used to laugh about it years after that. Of course, he died suddenly. He had a cerebral hemorrhage.

WC: I've met his son, who is a student in the religion department at Duke [University].

OH: Oh, yes.

WC: And his son is a very interesting guy, very interesting. On that Silent March, would there have been students there, too, as well as the adults?

OH: No. Mostly—we had a few. But we said to the students, “On this one, you can stay back and let the adults demonstrate that we’re supporting you.”

WC: This was a Sunday?

OH: Sunday night.

WC: Sunday night.

OH: Had a mass meeting, and then the march followed the mass meeting. We had to give instruction to folk. And we said to people, “If you can’t be intimidated—because you could have Klan folk out there—if you can’t, then don’t march, because somebody could take and spit at you or do something, say something to you.” We didn’t want them to get in line if they couldn’t take it.

WC: Would that have been sometime in April or May, that march? Do you remember?

OH: It’s been such a long time. You know, I have a clipping somewhere—if I could remember to put them together—of everything that the paper published about that, in ‘58-’59 through ’67. See, you had the others in ’67 when—’67, ’68. After King was assassinated we had one, and then something else happened in Greensboro and we had one. Had students killed at A&T.

WC: That’s right. Willie Grimes.

OH: Yeah, yeah. I was involved in that, in that I was chairman—vice chairman of the Unity Committee of the chamber of commerce. And the Human Relations Commission could not resolve it. Some of the folk would not—the students would not—they did not have confidence.

WC: Confidence in that, yeah.

OH: So what happened, they agreed that if the Unity Committee of the chamber would have a hearing, that they would agree to come to the hearing. Now, [Charles] McLendon, who was on chairman of the Unity Committee of the chamber, was on the school board.

WC: Michael Lendon?

OH: McLendon.

WC: How do you spell that last name?

OH: M-c-L-e-n—McLendon.

WC: Oh, McLendon. Okay.

OH: He was on the school board and chairman, so he felt that he could not afford to, so he had the excuse that he had to be out of town. I remember I had to take over. We had the chairman of the school board, the superintendent of the school system, the assistant. We had the principal of Dudley. We had the students involved at Dudley. It was over a student election at Dudley they got discord.

WC: Right, Claude Barnes.

OH: Yeah. And then we had, of course, Nelson Johnson and the folk from A&T. And they all agreed that if the chamber would—the Unity Committee would have a hearing, that they would all agree to come. They felt that it would be objective. So I remember we met for four hours one day and didn't resolve it, and had to come back and meet three hours the next day. That was a long session. Al Lineberry was president. You know about Al—

WC: Yeah.

OH: He's former chairman of the school board. And it was his leadership, I think, which helped to resolve this. We had weak as support as possible almost to resolve the thing. The students and the folk at A&T were determined that they needed to have another election, that it was not fair. And the folk at the school board—these folk were determined that no way in the world we were going to have—so Al Lineberry, who was president of the chamber—the Unity Committee form and make a recommendation to the board of the chamber. I remember Cecil Bishop, he was there at that time—because he too was on the board of the chamber, and I was chairman. So we had the recommendation to be made that morning in a special meeting. Al Lineberry said, "I cannot vote as chairman, but if I could vote, I would vote to accept the report." The report was that they needed to have another—and that was dumping a lot of pressure on the school board. He was also on the school board!

WC: That's right. That's right, yeah.

OH: That was the thing. His leadership really led to resolving that. I don't think that thing would have been resolved if Al—if we had a weaker person. He felt that it was the right thing to do, and it was not popular for him to say that.

WC: So he took a lot of flack on that?

OH: Yes. Well, I had the greatest admiration, because he was chairman of the school board when we were under court orders to desegregate, and he said to us one night that—he said, “If I remain as chairman, we’re going to comply. We’re not going to fight the court. We’re going to satisfy the court.”

WC: We’ve been fighting too long.

OH: Yeah. This was his position. I have the greatest admiration. I tell him, I said, “Al, one thing I admire, I believe that you believe in taking a stand that is moral, regardless of the consequences. I have that feeling.”

WC: He is a man with great religious conviction.

OH: Yes, and he—I’ve seen him do that. It was very unpopular for him to do it, because he didn’t have much support on the board of the chamber at that time, as far as that particular stand. Because he said [it], I think a lot of them changed their minds.

WC: I understand that Stanley Frank was not exactly—

OH: I don’t think he had anybody’s support—perhaps one or two persons on that board at that time. You see, I was on the board of the chamber. Cecil Bishop—the two of us had been appointed by Al Lineberry on the board, and we knew the sentiment.

WC: Who else was—do you remember who else would have been on the board at that time?

OH: Black, Isaac Miller, I think, president of Bennett. There were only three of us on there at that time.

WC: How about the whites on the board?

OH: [Allen] Wannamaker of WBIG was on there. He was the only one that supported Al. I think the only liberal folk at that time. Dave Schenck was on there at that time, a former mayor. I think Wannamaker was the only one who normally would have supported, but

after Al took such a strong stand that this was the thing to do, that a lot of them changed their minds and voted to support the students.

WC: He just put his prestige on the line and they had to go with him on it.

OH: I think they thought that he was right. But they didn't want to—you know, you have your school system, and felt that—since they felt that strongly that they ought not to retract—have the principal of the school retract what they'd done, that they didn't want to have that type of action brought on them. But Al felt that if they'd made a mistake, they need to go ahead and do the right thing.

WC: Sure. Do you think that the records on that are available, the school board? Not the school board meeting, but the—I suppose there must have been some documents on that, some reports on that.

OH: Yes, you can get that. The civil rights commission [U.S. Commission on Civil Rights], they had to have a hearing on it, because fellows were killed. King Cheek, at that time he was—

WC: King Cheek, yeah.

OH: —in charge. He was chairman of the state. And they had—I had to—I think I made the report from the chamber at that time. They had the students. Of course Claude. They had somebody from the school board. They had this hearing. I think they were students from A&T. So that was recorded, and I'm sure that the report would be available.

WC: So that's a federal report, really. That's the U.S. Civil Rights Commission came down and heard that.

OH: Yes, the King Cheek represented the state, so this would be available.

WC: And Mr.—was it F. D. Patterson who was, or [Franklin] Brown who was principal Dudley at that time?

OH: Yes, Brown was principal of Dudley.

WC: Brown. Is he still there?

OH: No, he retired. I don't know. He—I think he largely was responsible for the thing. We talked with them—the Webb of the American Federal Savings & Loan.

WC: Yeah, A. S. Webb.

OH: Rev. Bishop himself went to Dudley before things got out of control and pleaded with Mr. Brown to meet with the students and hear them out on this, but he was really afraid. He was afraid. We talked with them, and we offered to—in fact, we called a meeting. He didn't agree. We thought he would have. We called a meeting in our own church building that night. Everybody showed up—the students showed up, the folks from A&T, but he did not show. He was afraid of the students. He was really afraid.

WC: For his physical safety?

OH: Yeah. So he didn't show that night, so we couldn't do anything because he didn't show. It was only at the chamber—he had to come out because the school board, the chairman of the school board, they had agreed that they would have everybody involved in the school system there.

WC: Yeah. How about that. There is one other important question I want to ask about the '63 period. In terms of the student movement itself, who was it that was really putting that together?

OH: Bill Thomas.

WC: Bill Thomas.

OH: Jesse Jackson [phone rings] has gotten credit for it. He was president of the student body. At that time Bill Thomas—Bill is a lawyer now in New Jersey, and he [unclear]

WC: In New Brunswick?

OH: What?

WC: Is he in New Brunswick, New Jersey?

OH: Well, I have a letter. I've got two or three letters from Bill. But he was here. We talked about it. I told Bill, I said, "Bill, you offered the leadership, but never got any credit for it because Jesse was always in the line." Jesse was president of the student body. Of course he had better control over the students.

WC: Was he—

OH: But the—yes?

WC: I wonder whether—I thought Ezell Blair was still president of the student body, and that Jesse was captain of the football team.

OH: No, at that time Jesse was—in '63.

WC: Okay.

OH: Yeah, in '63.

WC: Okay, he was president—

OH: Ezell was president in '62. See, he was there in '60 when the sit-ins, so he became president after that happened. But Jesse had moved in at the time, and Jesse was—had good control over the students. So Bill was a person that did not want to go out front. He was not that kind of person, but he called the shots.

WC: And I've also heard that [A. Knighton] "Tony" Stanley was involved in calling the shots.

OH: He was advising. He was advisor to CORE. Bill—of course, he was advisor to Bill Thomas.

WC: So do you think it would be accurate to say that the two of them were the field marshals?

OH: For the—yes.

WC: For the students.

OH: For the beginning period of that, Bill Thomas and Stanley—Tony, yeah—they were the persons. Tony was advisor to CORE, and Bill was president of CORE. But Bill was a very smart fellow. He was quiet. He didn't push himself ahead. And Stanley was a person who did not—he would only assess—give an assessment more or less, and say, "You do what you—." He was not a person who could control people.

WC: Yeah. Well, I need to see—

OH: He advised more or less, and said—but he didn't—he was not personally in control. So Bill Thomas was really the person. Bill was on the coordinating committee when we

formed it. Bill was the person who represented CORE on the committee. That's why I know he was smart. Bill was smart. But he never wanted to be out front. He let—if they had a march, he said, "Let Jesse go ahead and do it." He was that kind of person.

WC: I know you know Dr. [Lewis] Dowdy very well, but I wonder whether—[Governor Terry] Sanford wrote him a letter, I understand, telling him that he really had to make sure the A&T students got back on campus—take them out of jail, in fact.

OH: Well, of course, what happened, the students refused to come out of jail. I know the students from Bennett—Ms. Player—of course, they couldn't bring any pressure on Ms. Player. Ms. Player talked with us about this. The students from Bennett had been stationed primarily at Evergreen, the Evergreen Nursing Home. It was not Evergreen at that time, it was a vacant building. So they had been placed there. And they said the students—they wanted—because it was expensive to feed all these folks. The city had four or five hundred folks they had to feed every day. It's expensive. They said to the students once, "You know the door's open. Y'all can go on home. You're not—you're free."

They said, "No, we're not free until you open the stores downtown." [laughs]
"No, we're not free yet."

"You're free to leave."

"No, we're not free. Until you open the—we won't be free."

But they tried to get her to ask the students. She said, "No. The students will decide for themselves."

So Dowdy was under pressure because it was a state institution. He called and said, "Hicks—" who was president. He called us one morning about 12:30, and he was really confused. He didn't know what to do, what step to take. We didn't try to tell him. We just said, "Well, you have to think in terms of what will happen, the consequences. If you should bow to the state, the respect you that you would have in university, city—you know, you have the options, but you make the decision. You think about what would happen if you bow to folk like Sanford and [even state?]." Of course, he decided that he couldn't afford to do what they wanted to do.

But he was under a lot of pressure. [phone rings] He couldn't sleep at night. He was under a lot of pressure. But he decided that he could not afford to bow to the pressure from the state.

WC: Yeah. Well, I've seen a couple of the things from Sanford, in Sanford's governor's papers down there in Raleigh. It is some interesting material down there, very interesting. There is some stuff down there from you to [Governor Luther] Hodges I've seen down there, when you used to write letters to—

OH: Yes, I—yes, this voluntary plan [Pearsall Plan] that he—I mean, I thought that was the silliest thing. They're going to integrate by "voluntarily." And they knew good and well the white students would never go to black schools. How are you going to have integration one way? And I used to write letters to him. We were in a meeting once—I forgot where it was—and I made the mistake of saying it was silly. [laughter]

WC: Well, that wasn't a mistake. I'm sure he—I'm sure he—

OH: Well, that kind of rubbed him, though, you know, his "silly plan." "The silly plan that you folks came up with, voluntary school—" I said, "This is really a silly plan." I made the mistake of saying it was a silly plan.

WC: He's the kind of man who if you criticized him at all, he got terribly upset.

OH: Well, this really upset him. They had several persons in that meeting, and he was upset, and two or three others too, when I said it was a silly plan. Oh, he had the fellow—the author of the plan.

WC: [Thomas J.] Pearsall.

OH: Pearsall was there. They were upset when I said it was a silly plan.

WC: Do you remember what Pearsall said?

OH: I don't recall. They were so upset. I think it was a good while before anybody really commented, because they had several of us there at the meeting. John—no, I'm not too sure whether John Flemming was there or not. John Flemming was acting president of Shaw [University]. I'm not too sure whether he was in that meeting or not, but he used to give them—he opposed it too at that time. Kelly Alexander was not vocal on that particular one as I recall.

WC: Would John Wheeler have been there? John Wheeler or—

OH: No. [unclear]

WC: No.

OH: There was a lawyer there. The lawyer who had—he was not involved in this one—but the lawyer who had the first civil rights case in North Carolina—two of them, Sam Mitchell and Herman Taylor, had the first civil rights case in North Carolina, the Old Fort [Carson

v. Board of Education of McDowell County] case. And this is what I think we mentioned in that—we talked about in that meeting, about a silly plan and how folk have suffered because of this segregation, school segregation. They had the kids from Old Fort who would have to be taken to Asheville to school because they couldn't attend, and we mentioned this. But they had the court case that—well, this was three or four years before '54. Herman Taylor—who's here now, happens to be a member of our church—and Sam Mitchell took that case. The other black lawyers would not take it. It was a hot potato. It was really a hot potato at that time to take that case and fight that, and they took that case. They didn't get much money.

George Wheeler was chairman of the—he was on the committee to—the committee to support the Old Fort parents. John Flemming, Bill Greene[?], who is dead, was the executive secretary of the state teachers' association. John Wheeler, a fellow Grady Davis, who was in charge—

WC: I know him.

OH: You know Grady?

WC: Yeah.

OH: John Flemming. I was on that committee. Had about—they only had about fifteen of us on that committee to raise money to support the folk at Old Fort. And Taylor and Mitchell took it, but they didn't get—we didn't raise enough money to hardly to pay their transportation. But out of interest in it, they pursued it.

WC: Oh, that's terrific. That's amazing. That's a long time ago, too.

OH: Yeah, that's been a long time ago. That was—

WC: Twenty-six years ago. Well, I think what I should do—I've really gone over the time that you have to spend today, so I think I'll just—

[End of Interview]