

**GREENSBORO VOICES/GREENSBORO CIVIL RIGHTS ORAL HISTORY
COLLECTION**

INTERVIEWEE: Vance Chavis

INTERVIEWER: William Link

DATE: December 6, 1988

[Begin Tape 1, Side A]

WILLIAM LINK: This is William Link, and I'm here with Vance Chavis. The date is December 6, 1988. I wonder if you'd mind talking a little bit about your background: how you got to Greensboro, your education, where you were educated, and your first sort of impressions of Greensboro.

VANCE CHAVIS: My education started in the Presbyterian parochial school in the town where I was born, Wadesboro, North Carolina, which is about fifty miles east of Charlotte. From this Presbyterian connection, of course, I was motivated to go to college. In the meantime, however, we had no high schools for blacks in Wadesboro. They built a large one there for, for the whites, at that time about a hundred thousand dollar brick building, which was very, almost luxurious at that time. They built an eight or ten thousand dollar frame building for the blacks. Of course, we only went to the seventh grade.

So after the completion of the seventh grade, I went to Johnson C. Smith University in Charlotte, which was then Biddle University, where I did my high school work. And this of course came through my church affiliation, and I received a scholarship to go to Johnson C. Smith. And I went there in high school and also four years in college. I finished college in 1929. I majored in chemistry. But being a person of, I guess you would say down low on the economic ladder, I had sense enough to realize that I would probably have to teach. So, fortunately, I took enough hours in education so that I had a Class A certificate for teaching in North Carolina. After completion of my degree, I applied for a teaching position in Charleston, West Virginia; Winston-Salem; Greensboro; and Durham. You see, I always wanted to go to a pretty good place, because the salaries were better in these places.

WL: You had no, no idea about staying in Charlotte or--

VC: No, I didn't like Charlotte.

WL: You didn't like Charlotte?

VC: No. Not for teaching, no. I didn't like the schools. Something about it; I wanted to get away. But I had been to Greensboro. And I came up here to a fraternity dance, and being a young man at the time I was very much interested in the women, in the lady people. I guess that was normal. At least I'm glad that I was interested in the women. And so I found a lot of very attractive teachers in Greensboro. So that, of course, enhanced my interest in coming here.

And it was not until about August the first that I received an appointment here, the week after I got one for Durham. And I'm glad that they came in that time span, because probably I would have gone to Durham. But that's how I got to Greensboro to teach. Another reason I wanted to come here--when I came up in the spring for this dance, I also visited Dudley High School, which was the best looking school, high school, I had seen at that time. And they had an excellent faculty, which they still do.

WL: Relatively new at that point.

VC: Yeah, it was relatively new. In fact, it was just completed. And so that is why I came to Greensboro.

WL: And what were your first impressions of Greensboro, as a, well, as a city, what kind of race relations did you think existed in Greensboro compared to what you had experienced in your life so far?

VC: Well, at that age I didn't have too much contact before about the interracial conditions. My background had been with separation, though I'd never liked it and had one or two skirmishes because of it. But I didn't, as I said, I came here in '29, but really in the thirties I did affiliate with the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People]. I was the secretary of the NAACP during the thirties. And, I have always been against segregation and did all that I could to fight it.

But, now, Greensboro again--you asked about Charlotte—and Greensboro I found a little better atmosphere in the contacts that I did have with the whites--say, in the stores or on the streets--than I did in Charlotte. I had never been called the ugly word, or say, a nigger in Greensboro. Though once or twice that term was used in reference to me and was used not too freely in Charlotte. I don't think Charlotte was that way now; I think it is more progressive than it was at that time. You must recall too that Charlotte is not too far from the South Carolina line. And I don't want to say too much about people from South Carolina, because I found there are good and bad everywhere. But, at the time, I think we had more of the mill people and the lower class of white people who would

migrate into Charlotte, and that probably was the cause of the attitude there.

WL: They bring their racial attitudes with them and sort of create a South Carolina kind of atmosphere in Charlotte.

VC: Yeah, but during the thirties we did not have any, say, real problems. The involvement of the NAACP at that time was more or less with people who had gotten in trouble in other parts of the country. Like those fellows who--I can't think of their names right now, there were about seven of them got to raping that woman on the railcar.

WL: Scottsboro.

VC: Huh?

WL: Scottsboro, Alabama.

VC: Scottsboro, yes. And then there was what was called the anti-lynching bill. And the NAACP fought to have a bill against lynching for a long time. It never did pass, but because lynching eventually was reduced to practically zil, so there was not too much effort put in there. But at least we had accomplished our interests and efforts in the anti-lynching bill. But these were things that we were involved in.

Following that, the NAACP was involved in getting blacks into institutions of higher learning. And not only in the south, because I think they had the *Sweatt [v. Painter]* case out in Detroit. So were interested in things of that nature, and, and I just naturally gravitated to those causes.

WL: How big a group was it that were--

VC: And we had only, we hardly had 25 people in there then. You have to think of the time. I don't know whether there were any more teachers in it, because people were afraid of it. See, at that time, people thought of the NAACP like they did the Black Panthers. I don't know whether I was stupid or what, but I was always affiliated and always canvassed the people at Dudley where I fought for membership. Most of them were members. But I ran into quite a few people who were not affiliated. I ran into some who even opposed it [laughs], believe it or not.

WL: Black people?

VC: Black people, yeah.

WL: Was there--there was never any possibility of your being intimidated, was there any pressure exerted?

VC: No, never was. The principal I worked with understood it. He didn't encourage me or discourage me, but he knew what was going on. So far as the superintendent, I don't know whether he knew or not. But most of the superintendents that I worked under here were fairly decent people.

WL: Yeah.

VC: Fairly decent.

WL: How did the school, Dudley, Dudley, work within the system, overall city school system? There must have been obvious disparities or, or differences between white schools and black schools. How did, how did, how did white school officials relate to Dudley?

VC: Well, in many of the largest cities at that time, they had a black person who acted as what they call supervisor of Negro schools. They had one in Wilmington; Columbia, South Carolina; Greensboro. And so this person more or less was responsible. Sometimes he had enough power to, to do the hiring. In fact, I was hired by a man named Mr. [W. B.] Windsor who held that position, with the approval, of course, of the superintendent. But they gave most of the employment for the black personnel.

Now as to the differences that existed, I mentioned to you that Dudley was a very new building when I went there. But they built Dudley at the same time that they built Greensboro High School, which was the only high school here at that time for whites. But a lot of the material I saw there in the chemical department and the physics department was old material which had been brought from the original Greensboro High School. There were very few apparatus, or apparatus, [laughs] that was new. So through the years we got new material, because we charged fees. And the teachers, individual teachers, were able to purchase what they wanted to from those fees. So over the years we had an excellent supply and quite a bit of equipment.

WL: These fees would be charged by the school or by the teacher? For the whole school?

VC: They were charged to the students. Students paid lab fees. We used some of it. Technically, we were not supposed to buy supplies. Anything that could be used up, it was against the law to make a purchase, but if it was equipment--because one had to maneuver sometimes and get the supplies mixed in with the equipment, if you see the difference there. But anyway, through the years we had a pretty good supply.

Now some would tell you that we got old books, but at Dudley I don't recall

getting books. Very few books. And I taught physics and general science, because most books that I taught we were able to place our own requisition and usually they would come new. On the other hand, my wife was the book manager at one of the elementary schools and they did get old books from--after they had been used by the white students. And you never had the reverse.

WL: Old books going to the black schools--

VC: Old books always went--

WL: --or the other way--

VC: Yeah, one way traffic. Always came to us, to the black school. But no, except by error, no, no books used in the black school would ever go over to the white school.

WL: Was there--there wasn't much contact, then, between say--

VC: Very little contact--

WL: --white and blacks?

VC: --I never met any white teachers or any white principals. I saw the superintendent because he would come out to the meeting. And occasionally, I might see the superintendent at an some interracial conference or meeting or something of that nature.

WL: How would you characterize the attitude of the city school system toward Dudley specifically and toward the city's black schools generally based on your own experiences. Do you think it was a fairly--

VC: Well, I think the psychology then or the attitude then was more or less as it is today. That is, if you looked at something black you thought of it as being inferior, and that hasn't changed. See Frank Robinson [first black manager in Major League Baseball] can't be as good as a white manager. He's not expected to be. I remember Marion Anderson saying that she wasn't a black singer but she was a singer who was black. In other words, because once you say something is black you categorize it, and that is still done. And Dudley is still thought of as being an inferior school, because it was--has a history of being a black school.

Personally, I thought it was a very good school, but so far as the whites were concerned, they thought of it as being maybe, I will not call it second class, but being inferior. It had to be inferior, it had black personnel and it had black students. How could

they be equal to the others? And that's the attitude. And I think some of that attitude still exists. Otherwise some of the people, the white people wouldn't want their children to transfer from Dudley due to some [pause] technicality or refuse to send them there in the first place. This has been the whole problem in trying of integrating the schools. And most of the white schools, I mean black schools, have been actually closed. It's all right for us to be bused to the white school, but it's difficult to get people to bus their children to the formally black school. And I don't know why, because they told us then that the schools were equal.

I'll give you another example as to the equality of the schools. Two instances. During the depression I had no work. We did not make any money. We may, I may have worked for five hundred dollars a year for eight months. So during the summer I needed some money; I needed a job. But the superintendent--as I said, we had a pretty good relationship--and I told him about it, so he gave me a job working with the WPA [Works Progress Administration]. And I had six men who worked under me and we went from school to school and they washed down the walls. Now there were several schools that were built on the same plan at the same time. But, for instance, Price had a concrete floor in the corridors and Aycock and Caldwell school all had terrazzo. If you're familiar with that type of flooring, you know how much of a difference that made.

Not only that, most of the time when I was in the school I would go to the library and read. But the libraries in those schools had far more volumes, of course, than the black schools. So those were the differences. The main difference maybe to me is that they made about 30 percent more than the black teachers. So you had a differential in salaries for black and white teachers.

WL: And everybody knew about it.

VC: Oh, everybody knew about it. It wasn't until--I can't think of the governor's name--until our salaries were equalized. In fact, I think the--if I went to court or a group of us went to court, I think we would be able to get that back pay. [laughs] Because we worked for many years for less than, than the white teachers.

WL: What sort of support did Dudley have within the community, black community? What kind of role do you think it came to play in the thirties, generally?

VC: Well, I think Dudley played a very important role. It was highly respected in the black community. The teachers were respected. In fact, teachers then were respected more, I think, than they are now. They held maybe high positions and were held in greater esteem by the public, even the white public, and by the students more so than now. I don't know why, but I think that was true.

One thing unique about Dudley was that in order to get the faculty, we had to

reach out all over this country. And surprisingly maybe to you, of the blacks who did finish college in the North, as we called it, northeast, they could not get employment in New York or Philadelphia or New Jersey, so those who did complete college had to come south. So, as a result, we had a teacher who finished [University of] Southern Cal[ifornia], we had one who finished Penn, University of Pennsylvania that is. And of course the others had come from all over the United States from all the black schools: Tuskegee [Institute, Alabama], Morehouse [College, Georgia], Talladega [College, Alabama], Wilberforce [University, Ohio] and Lincoln University in Pennsylvania, and from the schools in North Carolina.

WL: So you had a great diversity and a quite talented--

VC: Yeah, quite talented. But now you find, I think, if you were to examine the faculty--now, I am presuming this--that most of them would be more or less local people from the schools in North Carolina, primarily. Which means--which, there's nothing wrong in that, except maybe you'd more ideas where you have a greater variety and people with different attitudes and mores and points of view to add to the total culture there at Dudley. I think that it was an asset.

WL: Did--what effect did this environment have, this intellectual environment, have on the students?

VC: Well, I feel that [pause]it brought about quite a bit of motivation in the students. And due to the fact that at that time you didn't have too many people--a small percentage of blacks had finished college, hardly any of them were PhDs, but some too, and a few master's [degrees]. Of course, if you go back that far and if you look at the percentage not too many people all put together in the United States had master's degrees and gone beyond college.

But I think having contact with these people inspired them. Now, now the proof of that is the number of students that we graduated who had become very successful in all of the fields: engineering, medicine, law, and you name it, we've had people from Dudley who have become outstanding in those fields. And some of them will say that they were inspired by somebody at Dudley. Or at least the school inspired them.

WL: The teachers provided very strong role models because of the enrollments--

VC: Very strong role models, yes. And a teacher never knows, because I remember one boy whose mother told me he was smoking a pipe, which wasn't something good. But she said he was smoking his pipe because I smoked a pipe [laughs]. And I'm sorry it was that kind of emulation, but at least you see that the students did watch us and observe us and

want to do some of the things that we were doing, or someday do the same work or follow in our footsteps. In most instances, they've gone beyond. In many instances, I should say, not most, because we have had failures too. The superintendent used to tell me, he said, "You always talk about those that were successful. How about those who went to the chain gang?" I said, "I might have a few of those." [laughs]. But I think we had our share of successful people, when you consider the background, when you consider, that is, the social and educational and economic background that our students came from. I think they've done very well.

WL: If you had an aspiring, very successful student, where would you--what college would you encourage them to go to? What sort of options would you present them with?

VC: Well, at that time they had to go to an all-black college. And if I could, I would try to get them to go to mine, because I thought a lot of it. Not too many went. I'd like to name one or two. One is a judge and is a member of the Supreme Court, a judge there in New York, who finished Dudley.

WL: Who is that?

VC: Sandifer, Jawn Sandifer. There's another one who has a PhD in theology from Yale. He got his bachelor's degree at Johnson C. Smith and was an outstanding, outstanding basketball player. But he's now in San Diego, James Hargett. His father was a minister of St.--pastor up here at St. Stephens. I've had--those who went to [Johnson C.] Smith. But, of course, the other teachers and all were vying and dependent upon the schools themselves, so we had quite a few go to A&T [North Carolina A&T State University] and Bennett [College], of course, and to Howard [University] and to Hampton [College]. Not too many go to Morehouse, which maybe is our most prestigious school, because of Martin Luther King and a number of college presidents that they have turned out.

WL: So Dudley had a certain relationship with a number of schools in--

VC: Oh yeah.

WL: Yeah. You had a good students--

VC: And, and Dudley students had no difficulty in entering these schools; [unclear] a professor [unclear] matriculating.

WL: If, if a recommendation was sent saying this student is a good student, that was enough?

VC: That's right. That's right. And occasionally we could get a scholarship for them if they needed it, and if they had the necessary IQ or had done well so far as grades were concerned.

WL: The, the school principal at Dudley must have been a strong figure in this period.

VC: He was very strong. He was autocratic. He ran a pretty stiff school there. He took very little foolishness.

WL: What was his name?

VC: In some instances, maybe he wasn't all perfect, but as an organizer, he had no superior. Because he just knew the high school, and he knew the curriculum of high school, and we had good curriculum. And so much of that came from him. And so much of the material things we had at Dudley that from him, too, because he was a courageous man. He was, how do I say, persistent. He persisted in getting as much as he could from the board or whoever was responsible for dispensing these physical things. And of course he, he was diplomatic as well. And so I think he was a very good principal.

WL: He must have had to be skillful politically to balance these things?

VC: Very skilful. Very intelligent.

WL: What was his name? The principal?

VC: John Tarpley. John A. Tarpley. He still lives. He's in a rest home at this time. But he, he was a good principal.

WL: You mentioned earlier that when you, when you came to Greensboro, you were one of the early organizers of the NAACP--

VC: Not organizer, but I was one of the--

WL: --members.

VC: --but I was one of the members. When we had only a few people. Yeah.

WL: Right. What are your memories of how the segregated system worked in Greensboro, say--well, in a variety of areas: public accommodations, or restaurants, or transportation, and how did you react, how did you feel about this kind of system?

VC: Well, I always had the desire to see people come together. And I was never able, and still not able, to hold malice. And notwithstanding injustices, I still feel that there are some good people everywhere. And I had the privilege of associating with the whites, let me say, early in the process of integration in the city. First of all, I was a member of a group known as, I believe it was called the Interracial Commission. Kind of a quasi-organization, because it was not appointed by the city or the county, but it is called the Guilford County Interracial Commission. This was the only thing when I came here that was interracial.

WL: And it was part of the state interracial--

VC: Yeah. I criticized it at first, because I thought the Negroes who were on this commission were what we called "handkerchief head," antebellum type of people. And people who were able to get along because they always agreed. But as time went on, I accepted membership in this, because I was invited, and we had quite a few people who were progressive as members in this organization.

One probably you know, [Richard] Bardolph. Bardolph's a member. There was a Mrs. Smith who was a member; she died recently, one of the finest women I have ever known. And I can't think of her name. Not Lena[?] Louise Smith; it's another Smith. Her husband is a member of the school board. But she was very prominent--a member the League of Women Voters and with the YWCA [Young Women's Christian Association].

But anyway, this group met. And sometimes we would bring covered dinners and we sat down and we'd eat together. And this was the beginning of my interracial contacts in Greensboro. Now later on, through the YWCA, we had groups that would meet. One of a kind of religious nature, and we would meet there. And sometimes--we didn't always have food, but at the time that was the only place where the two groups could eat. That's why I still have a lot of respect for the YWCA.

WL: This was fairly early.

VC: Yeah, this was fairly early.

WL: Nineteen forties maybe, thirties or forties?

VC: Nineteen forties. Yeah, nineteen forties. And then there was another interracial group that didn't last long, and I was president of that group. And we didn't have too many, only about ten or eleven. And that was Americans for Democratic Action. Now, if we can get our timing right, you remember when McCarthy came in, and we had McCarthyism. Well, he frightened everybody so much that we practically dissolved, and I think that was

the reason.

But really some of the people we had in that was Bardolph and another lady [Elizabeth Duffy] from the faculty at Woman's College, and I can't recall her name, but she was one of the smartest women I have ever known. She taught psychology out there. And the two of us--in fact, the three of us were appointed to the Redevelopment Commission when it first started by Mr. [Robert H.] Frazier. And he met us at one of these meetings. He was a former mayor of Greensboro. He wasn't thought of as being very liberal, but he was at this meeting. I don't whether I understand it myself. Because he tried to convince me to vote, to become a Republican and vote for [Richard] Nixon [laughs]. But he was a good man at heart, I think. But these were some of my first experiences.

WL: What did these interracial meet[ings], groups, organizations do exactly? Did they consider--

VC: Well, let me tell you something real tangible that we did.

[End Side A--Begin Side B]

WL: Okay, we were talking about the interracial groups and--

VC: Yes. Now going back to this interracial commission, the fact that we were there indicated that we wanted to better society. We wanted to eliminate discrimination and segregation. So one of the projects that we took on was the elimination of black and white fountains in Greensboro. Now as you will read the history and as you will read the papers, people--many of them still think this was not done until we had the sit-in at Woolworth. But this was done before Martin Luther King and before Woolworth. And I'll name you the places where they had black and white--or colored--water. One was the City Hall, one was the Guilford County Courthouse, another was the Duke Power Company, another was Meyers [Department Store]. And some didn't have it. Vanstory never had but one. But Woolworth, there was another store, [pause] Kress's, they were up town. They all had two fountains, white and colored.

Now, four of us from this group, only four of us, we went around and talked to all of these people to get them to eliminate them. Some delayed, but all received us very kindly. I went to an A&P [grocery] store and the manager there told me, said, "Well, I'll tell you these little white children they come up here and they drink out of all of them anyway, they don't know the difference." He said, "But we're going to paint it soon, and we'll just paint over the signs." And Carson Bain, who was a county commissioner at the time--we wanted [signs] removed from the county courthouse--talked to me. He said, "Now won't make a big deal out of it," said, "But when we paint it again, we'll just paint

out 'white' and 'colored'." And so they did.

Now, the other people who worked with me was the same Mrs. Smith--we worked together; we all had equal stakes [laughs], I don't mean to say with me--and Richard Bardolph from Woman's College, and Mrs. Angie [Angeline D.] Smith, who was a co-worker and associate of mine out at Dudley High School. But the four of us went to all of these places, and they all eliminated this "black" and "white" water, which meant--practically eliminated in Greensboro, because we went to all the places. We got away from Meyer's and Woolworth's and City Hall. I forgotten now who the mayor was, but I talked with him at City Hall. Someone else went to Duke Power. I think Duke Power was about the last and the hardest customer we had.

But, anyway, I thought that was significant, because now people when they talk about the South they say, you know, people had to go to different restrooms and to drink different water. But we were able to get them to do that voluntarily, just from the contact. Because in North Carolina there was no requirement. This is something else that a lot of people don't know. Segregation was not required in North Carolina. I think in some cases, like the theatre, black people would go in. But as a rule, by custom, if they had on a uniform dressed like a nurse they had no trouble. They walked right in and sit down with the children in their care. Or if it was a nurse, the white person in their care.

There is no law in North Carolina requiring separate restrooms. In fact, this was what we were told in some of our meetings. I think Dr. Bardolph did the research on this. But being in the South, generally we followed. And I think the reason we had black--colored and white water in Kress's and Woolworth was because most of these buildings probably what was done in Atlanta. The architects probably sent a regular form to--and they just presumed that we had to have that. And that's why we had it. So we had no trouble, nothing legal about it, so we were able to eliminate it.

WL: This all took place about when, do you remember?

VC: This is--

WL: Drinking fountain campaign.

VC: I am trying to think. I think it was in the forties or early fifties. It was in the fifties. Yeah, it was in the fifties.

WL: So well before the whole Woolworth's--

VC: Yeah, well before the sixties.

WL: Yeah. Why do you suppose they changed the drinking fountain rules so--

VC: Well, I think because they realized themselves how unfair and how stupid it was. There was no difference in the water, it was just a matter of embarrassing a whole group of people, the black people, the only purpose.

WL: Did you find other white people in Greensboro who were sympathetic to making changes like this in the forties and fifties, or were these people exceptional? Were they part of other, say, representative of other people that were present?

VC: Well, let me see. I'm trying to think. I want to believe that there were others. But other than the YWCA and this group that met as the Greensboro--or rather the Guilford County Interracial Alliance, or whatever it was called, these were the only groups I know that worked for. Because even the Ministerial Alliance was separate. Everything was separate. These were the only--this--and, course, as I said the YWCA worked to about integration in that program. For a long time that was the only place where a black and white could go and eat.

To give you an idea, there was a man here named Reverend Weatherby and he received the [Silver] Beaver [Award] for his work in the Boy Scouts of America. They had a banquet at the King Cotton Hotel, and they were going to award him this banquet because general [unclear] council was holding its annual banquet at the hotel. But they invited some of us to, to witness his receiving this award.

So we went to the hotel, but we couldn't eat; we had to stand up there and wait. Many times after that I wanted to kick myself for going, but I didn't know what I was running into. And you probably can't imagine how embarrassed a person would feel standing up when other people are finishing their meals at the banquet, and you have to wait until they are finished so you can witness the ceremony.

And--which brings me back to another experience we had here in Greensboro in regards to segregation. And this took place in the late thirties. They brought a motion picture here to the Carolina Theatre. The man who managed it, I think he still lives, his family still lives here, named Montgomery.

In the motion picture there was a black woman named Jeni LeGon and she was in the same show with Eddie Cantor. But in this show, they seemed to--it was a little, they had a little more familiar status than the usual movie. In other words, she was accepted in this movie more or less as an equal rather than as a "step-and-fetch-it." But because of this, the manager of the theater cut this portion out of the film. And as a result, we, we boycotted not only the Carolina Theatre, we boycotted the National Theatre. Those were the two theatres where blacks could go. At the time, though, we were going up to the gallery in both theaters. At the Carolina you had to go up the side, go in at the side and ascend about three flights of stairs.

The boycott was successful for about two or three weeks. Then they brought Fats

Waller here in person to the National Theatre, and so people came in here from all around and went to hear that. Then people started going back. But we tasted some blood in this effort. As for myself and a lot of others, I realized--and this ties up with my embarrassment at the King Cotton--I realized how stupid it was at my going to a side door paying to be segregated. And until this day, I, I'm not in the habit of going to see movies. In the summer sometimes I would go to New York; I could go see two movies in a day. When I would come back to Greensboro [I'd] just throw the habit away. And at that time someone asked me, said "Well, I don't know what you can do." I said, "Well, I can read, and I can listen to the radio." This was before television. But, that's my personal attitude about segregation.

WL: Rather than having go through this humiliating kind of experience, you would not see movies?

VC: That's right. Yeah. Of course, now, when all the people are doing it, you don't stop and think, you see. But when, for instance, someone faced you as an individual, you say, "Well, now, this, this is humiliating. I'm not going to do this." But we have been accustomed, everywhere you'd go--you're happy that you could go, because in many theatres you weren't admitted at all. So they admitted you by the side door, and you had to go to the gallery. But we accepted a lot of the indignities.

I had a white person to tell me--this was at North Carolina--a white lady said to us--we were taking the same courses down at [The University of North] Carolina and [North Carolina] Central University. And she said, "I don't see how you people can take the things that you do." And when you stop and think about it, you wonder how black people took the things that they did as long as they did. And some of it we did without any fight. And those who attempted to fight were called radicals and sometimes eliminated one way or the other. They lost jobs or they found some way to get them out of town. Even they would go so far as to put them in prison.

I think about the current events going on now, and I don't know too much about it, but it seems to me that something is rotten in Denmark[?] and there's something racial about these two Indians [Eddie Hatcher and Timothy Jacobs] down in Lumberton. Have you been keeping up with that?

WL: Yeah, I have. It does seem very suspicious. Getting back to segregation, would this extend to transportation, this attitude you had? I mean, how would you deal with that, that sort of thing? I mean the riding the bus--

VC: Well, on the bus, the blacks sat in the rear. I didn't have a car, but I solved it by walking everywhere. That's another instance where I did not accept segregation. I didn't write to the papers about it as I should have maybe. I didn't carry around a banner. I did talk

about it in the school, because I used to ridicule the students when they would tell me they were going to see a certain movie. I said, "You mean to tell me that you're going up there and pay to be segregated?" But they laughed at me. [laughs] Some of them remember today [and] still remind me of it.

But I mean, I was just a one man crusade, I guess. But I just didn't ride on the bus. So I had to experience that on trains, and I had to experience it on the interstate buses. But after I got a car, I didn't experience it on the interstate buses anymore. In most instances, you went to the back where the ride was rougher. And when you got on the train you sat in the first car, because when they had steam trains you'd get all the cinders in the first car. And sometimes they have--well, they did, they had the worst cars in the lineup, that would be for the colored. Older cars, that kind made of wood. Then they had steel cars. Which meant if you had a wreck it would splintered. So we had--always got the worst.

WL: So when you could, you avoided riding trains?

VC: When I could, yeah. Once I got a car I didn't ride the train. Of course, so many people--that's why the train have left us, I guess, because most people gave up on the train. But I didn't ride the train once I got an automobile.

You know, one of the--[pause]. Blacks couldn't ride on the Pullman for a long time. In some instances it was difficult, but at least you could get away. You were segregated once you got in the Pullman car, but you were by yourself, I guess. And then when they first started permitting blacks to eat in the dining cars, they would pull the curtain. And that's why I believe the NAACP--now some of these young people don't remember all these things; they may have to repeat it. But there's been a battle--everything they've gotten, the NAACP has been primarily the agency that has brought it about through the courts. Before Martin Luther King, these fights were made to get the schools integrated, to get the jobs integrated. And all of this has been done and is still being done through the NAACP.

WL: What about politics? Were blacks voting in very large numbers in the thirties when you first came?

VC: Well, I guess not too much. They weren't too interested, and they did not see too much [pause]--well, not rewards, but benefits from voting. And the attitude of a lot of blacks--say, "Well, let the white people run it. It's not going to do any good, anyway. If I vote, what good will it do?" But I'm not too good at remembering time, but I do recall that we had Reverend Sharpe[?] was the first one to run for the city council here. And that, that stimulated more interest.

And, of course, going back to the thirties again, [President] Roosevelt did a lot in

getting blacks to become interested in voting, even though they weren't able to vote for one of us. But they did become interested in voting, because they thought that it would help. So, and I think in Greensboro we have fair, not what it should be, but the blacks maybe had voted in larger numbers than in some other places. Some have said we had difficulty, but in my own experience, I never had any difficulty. Because I registered as soon as I came here. And at that time I had to go to the *Greensboro Daily News* to register. That was Precinct 5 at that time. But I don't remember any difficulties.

WL: So there wasn't any attempt to prevent blacks from registering at this point?

VC: Not, not from my experience. Dr. [George] Simkins might tell you differently. And some people have and I don't know. [With] different registrars, they might have been confronted with that. But I--in another time I voted in precinct number seven and they met over at Caldwell School, which was a predominantly white neighborhood at that time. In fact, I became a member of that precinct committee over there. And, so I didn't have any difficulties.

WL: Did the local Democratic party have, make any room for the black participation?

VC: No, this was more or less separate too, because they had a group here too that called themselves the Young, the Black Young Democrats. But, what they did primarily was [pause] receive money and send out cards with a ticket. And so they would send it out over that name. But that was the extent of their activity. It was separate. It wasn't a unified Democratic group.

WL: What, what would you say would be the beginning of much bigger black political involvement? When does it begin in Greensboro?

VC: Well, I think maybe [pause] the success locally, probably the success of electing a black to city council did a lot to increase the participation on the part of blacks. And from that point on, as blacks have participated more, I think it's helped. Then, of course, now we have more blacks employed by the local governments, the county and the city. And I think that has increased the participation.

Unfortunately--and this is true for all people in this country, it seems--we're too apathetic when it comes to exercising our right to vote. We know that from the last election. To me, it's pathetic. Because we think of the black people--and I go back and think of Patrick Henry and Thomas Jefferson, and all those people involved in the Revolutionary War, and those people who died in Boston and at Concord and Lexington so we could be free--and they died for black people as well as white. Moreover, we think of the blacks who died in Mississippi and Alabama and other places--black people and

white people--because recently, just this week, I saw on television where they had a meeting down in Atlanta talking about how these Jewish boys who were killed during the time that they were trying to get the vote in Mississippi on the march. So you see, a lot of people have died that we can vote. And I can't understand why people don't vote. But a large proportion of us don't.

WL: Half the people don't vote in the last election.

VC: Half of them don't. And when you stop to think about it, our president-elect and his vice president was elected by about 25 or 26 percent of the American people of voting age. That's pathetic. That's pathetic.

WL: The election of Dr. [William] Hampton, the first black city council person--

VC: Well, now, and his election--let me hastily add--was brought about by the fact that we formed--before he was elected, we formed this group called the Greensboro Citizens Association. This was the original organization. It was a little different from what they have now. But its purpose was to, number one was to recommend candidates to black people without receiving any money from the candidates. Recommending them on the basis of their qualifications and their racial attitudes. And he was president of the organization. So, through our politicking and trying to stimulate the black population to, to vote, we were able to get him elected. Of course, now, this was just part of the program. He himself was a gentleman and capable. And so at that time the election was citywide, so he had to get quite a few white votes, too.

But we first had to show that we were interested in him. So through this organization, through our political action, we were able to get him elected. And subsequently, we got other blacks interested. But this was the purpose of this organization. Now, I hate to toot my own horn, but I was instrumental in forming this organization. Because something moved me, and a lot of people aren't moved as readily sometimes as I am.

But I don't know the adjective to use, but I mentioned the Young Democrats, and there were other people, primarily ministers, who would go around and just sell the black vote. And many of the candidates in the city at that time would say, "Well, I don't need to do anything for the blacks, I'll just pay this man off, he'll get the votes and I'm through with him." And once he was elected, he was through. And this was what, anathema to me. It just moved something in me. So we wanted the organization to, to fight these groups who were receiving money and recommending candidates based on how much money they were paid, rather than on their qualifications. And this organization started about the time that Frank Graham was running and was defeated by Smith down in Raleigh.

WL: Willie Smith.

VC: Willie Smith. A lot of people don't remember those things. See, I remember Willie Smith. I remember when we were involved when L. Richardson Preyer was running. And a lot of people don't know who defeated these gentlemen, but I know this gentlemen and his kind who was responsible with that, and they're still very potent today in North Carolina politics. But all of this, most all of it was racial that defeated these candidates.

WL: The Graham campaign was openly racial, the second primary especially.

VC: Oh, yeah. Oh yeah, very racial. And of course [Clyde] Pepper and a lot of other people who lost to Senator Pepper at that time.

WL: [George] Smathers and Pepper.

VC: And we know what--yeah, Smathers--and we know what was used to defeat them.

WL: In fact, some of the Smathers people came up to the Graham campaign, didn't they?

VC: That's right.

WL: What was the--what did you find so attractive about Graham? How did Graham appeal to you as a person in the late 1940s?

VC: Well, Graham had--and the University of North Carolina had the reputation of being liberal. And I don't like the word that's used, but somebody used it yesterday in a Sanford[?] meeting, that the "crackers," they know it. A lot of people--fundamentalist, I'll say--knew that the University of North Carolina people were more or less liberals. And that he was one of the leaders. And that he saw everybody as, as a human being, people who worked around him. And we knew. He had spoken to black groups, and we knew. And we knew from what he was saying, or didn't say, that he more or less was the candidate for us. But the liberal people in North Carolina, you--we were able to follow certain spokesman, certain newspapers. We were able to know who was, shall I say, "good," and who was bad for us.

WL: Who was sympathetic. Was there much of an effort this time to register black voters in Greensboro?

VC: When, during the Graham period?

WL: Yeah. And during that--that was part of your program [of the] Greensboro Citizen Association.

VC: Oh, yeah, very much, yeah, yeah. We used to do a lot out at Dudley. And talking about the teachers, they had quite a few teachers out there who'd encourage the students to have their parents to register. Quite a few of them. And I think that was successful. I know it was, because I've had parents to tell me, said, "My boy got on me, kept on me until I registered." You know, just by degrees sometimes things like that will help. You know, have overwhelming success.

WL: And they didn't run into obstacles. It was just a matter of getting down there and registering for the most part?

VC: That is right. We had a large turnout. Not only that, the people voted then at the Hayes-Taylor YMCA [Young Men's Christian Association], and then we didn't have the machines. We stayed up there that night--there were so many voting in that precinct, we had to stay up there till about one o'clock [a.m.]. We were the last ones to get our report. Some of the liberal white people came out and helped us that night; they wanted to know what the results were. Of course, you know he[Graham] won in the primary. And they lost in the run-off, primarily because a lot of people had gone away for the summer. Teachers had gone for the summer. And so--

WL: Turnout was lower.

VC: --turnout was lower. Of course, we're trying to eliminate that now so we can just elect people in the primary on a plurality basis.

WL: Was there much of a feeling at this time that--this is 1949, 1950, and 1951--that things were changing? I mean, was there a perception that, you know, you have got the *Brown* decision down the road, *Brown v. Board of Education* down the road?

VC: I think so, because at that time we did have our feet in the door, more or less. Now we had gotten into the graduate schools. We had gotten into the total integration in, in the interstate travel--that is, the buses and the trains. So we made some inroads. And as I find now with the trouble that [Mikhail] Gorbachev is having in Russia, once you start opening up and becoming democratic, then you are going to have a greater demand, and then the people are going to become, what, more aggressive. And I think this is the result of that.

This is--these accomplishments made it possible for Martin Luther King to be more aggressive. This progress that had been made in North Carolina made it possible for these six [four] young men to go down to Woolworth. And I don't think at the same time they could have gone to my hometown, Wadesboro, or down to Greenville, North Carolina, and done the same thing at that time without getting their heads beat. They picked the right place at the right time. Because Greensboro, as you know, has always wanted to be thought of as a liberal city, as one of civilities, and one who has good interracial understanding. Of course, for a long time that was true as long as the blacks didn't want anything or didn't make any demands. So we all got along.

[End of Interview]