

## **GREENSBORO VOICES/GREENSBORO PUBLIC LIBRARY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT**

INTERVIEWEE: Henry and Shirley Frye

INTERVIEWER: Eugene E. Pfaff

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EUGENE PFAFF: Representative Frye, a native of Ellerbe, North Carolina, was an honors graduate from A&T College [North Carolina A&T State University] in 1953 and the University of North Carolina Law School in 1959. He has been a teacher of law and a former Assistant United States District Attorney for the middle district of North Carolina. In 1968, Representative Frye became the first black person to be elected to the North Carolina General Assembly since 1899. He has been twice cited in the list of the Ten Most Admired Blacks in Greensboro.

Mrs. Shirley Taylor Frye, a native of Fremont, North Carolina, and also an honors graduate from A&T College in 1953, has been active in various educational and community activities. The Fries, married in 1956, have two sons, Henry Eric and Harlan Elbert.

I'd like to welcome you both to the Greensboro Public Library Oral History project.

HENRY FRYE: Thank you. It's good to be a part of it.

EP: I'd like to begin by asking you what childhood experiences influenced you in coming to A&T College and in choosing your respective careers.

HF: Well, I'll start. I'm originally from Ellerbe, which is a small town and which has quite a bit of agriculture. And I was a part of what was then the New Farmers of America, which was an organization of black boys who worked with various phases of agriculture, similar to what is--what then was Future Farmers of America, and of course, what is now Future Farmers of America. And I came to A&T as a part of their program.

They invited A&T--I mean, they invited students from the various schools throughout the state to come. And, also, New Farmers of America held its state meeting at A&T. So, I came to A&T and liked it and looked forward to going back. And, of course, I had intended to major in agriculture. And this was the place for, at least black boys at that time, to go for agriculture. It was either here or State [North Carolina State

University]. And at that time black boys did not go to State in Raleigh. So that had a lot to do, of course, with my going to A&T at the, at the beginning.

I also knew several persons, including my Ag[riculture] teacher, who was a graduate of A&T and who had an influence on me in making that, that decision. And incidentally, that's one of the decisions that I think was the right one that I made. I'm a great believer in A&T. And it's now A&T State University, of course. And I think I made the right decision. I'm glad I made that one.

EP: Well, how about you, Mrs. Frye?

SHIRLEY FRYE: Well, it's just by happenstance that I ended up at A&T. My older sister and I were in the same class and graduated in the same year. And my father wasn't financially able to send both of us to college, so we decided that we'd stay out a year.

And during that year we both got jobs as waitresses at a restaurant. And I ended up in Greensboro. And a gentleman found us a place to stay at a lady's home by the name of Mrs. Bessie Lee. And she was a great believer in A&T. And my plans were to go to North Carolina Central University, which was North Carolina College at the time. She convinced me that A&T was a much better school than North Carolina Central. There were more students and that I would have more competition and I could really find out what kind of student I was. So I decided to go to A&T. And I'm very pleased that I did, because that's where I met Henry. And we participated in a lot of activities together.

EP: Well, I'd like to proceed, if I could, to mention the various community activities in which you both have participated. Representative Frye, you've been director of the United Fund, president of the Greensboro Citizens Association, member of the board of the North Carolina Council of Human Relations and Chairman of the Community Unity Committee. And Mrs. Frye, you've been a member of the Chamber of Commerce, where you received the Nathanael Greene Award in 1973. You were vice president of the United Way campaign and also president of the Greensboro YWCA. I'd like to ask, in light of these various community activities, what is your assessment of the Greensboro community in general, and the quality of local government, race relations, any number of aspects?

HF: Well, we could take the rest of the time talking about that, I suppose. Greensboro, being a city that has a large number of colleges and universities, is sort of a university city. And I think this has had a very positive influence on the city.

And it's a place where new ideas can at least be entertained and discussed. We're a little conservative, in that it takes us a good while to, to make a change. But at least it's open in the sense that you can have discussion and new ideas.

And it's also not dominated by any one particular corporation, or even one particular family, that can simply say that the city's going to go in this direction and it automatically goes. I found that--that at least, as I said, you can have new ideas. You can discuss them. And that the power structure, as such, is at least broad enough to include several people, and therefore it--I think this is, this is good. So I would rate Greensboro fairly high on the total scale, as far as cities generally are concerned.

EP: And how about you, Mrs. Frye?

SF: I have a tendency to really brag about Greensboro, especially with the national board of the YWCA, in which I am a part. And there are ninety women on that board from all across the country. And I always say, "Come to Greensboro. Greensboro is unlike any other city that you've ever been."

And the reason I say it is because, as Henry said, I think Greensboro is an open city. And you have--a cross, a cross section of people have an opportunity to participate in decision-making process in Greensboro. And a good example is the Gateways Project, and also some of the activities that came about during the 1970s, when the court-ordered desegregation was ordered.

I think it's an open city, and I'm glad to be a part of it. If you have a desire or an interest in participating, the opportunity is there. You just have to take advantage of it.

EP: Well, I'd like to proceed with this point, if I may. You mentioned the court-ordered busing situation in 1970. And as a member of the committee that prepared a smooth transition for the school busing program, I'd like to ask what was the background of this committee, and what single aspect or group of activities accounted for its success?

SF: I think there were a multiplicity of activities that brought about the success. One that I think that you're speaking of was a project in which was spearheaded by Mrs. Joanne Bluethenthal, who was then the chairperson of the lay profession Human Relations Advisory Committee. During her tenure, it was restructured. And I followed her as chairperson of that committee.

The committee decided that we ought to do something about listening to the views of different groups of persons. And the committee decided that it would begin with the teachers. Dr. James Watson, who is with the Department of Family Life, I believe he is with, at UNCG [University of North Carolina at Greensboro], and I would, in the process of talking to Dr. House, superintendent of schools, about our plan and to get permission from the school administration to follow through on the suggestions that the committee had done. And while we were in the lobby waiting to see Dr. House, we were discussing a meeting that had been held the night before. It was one of the high schools, either Smith or Page, I don't recall which one. And the parents were really concerned

and really upset. And they were expressing themselves. And it was a very, quote, "heated" meeting.

So Dr. Watson and I decided on our own that instead of listening to the teachers, that we ought to listen to the parents and give them an opportunity to really express themselves. And we used the same basic plan we had planned to use with the teachers. Instead, it was just for the parents.

And the basis was that no administrator with the schools would participate in the meetings, because we did not want anyone to be defensive. The only thing we wanted to do was allow the parents to listen, I mean to, to express themselves in this sort of a catharsis kind of thing. And this is what we did, we compiled the reports.

And, also, the committee made suggestions or recommendations to the school administration. As a result of those meetings, the school administration and school board listened to what the parents had to say and made recommendations. And the school board administration made all these things happen. They didn't happen as rapidly as we thought they should have. But I think the important thing is that they happened. And I think that the school board and administration were to be congratulated for allowing us as parents to criticize what was going on and to offer suggestions. And they listened to them.

EP: I think there's no doubt about the fact that it was quite a successful program. And I'd like to turn now, Representative Frye, to your becoming president of the Greensboro National Bank in 1971. I'd like to ask you, how have black-owned businesses helped Greensboro's black citizens? And, are these black-owned businesses increasing in number?

HF: They're not increasing in number. There were probably as many, if not more, say, several years ago than there are now.

I think that we--in fact, I know that we have a few that are much more viable that are also stronger than several years ago. I think that as far as the positive value of black businesses in the black community or even in the community in general--generally, the most positive thing I think, first of all, is an image type of thing. And an image from the standpoint of black children and to some extent, white children, but primarily black children who many times and many places grow up with the idea that the people who run things are of the opposite race. So that if they grow up seeing blacks in positions of finance, in positions of business generally, that this has a positive effect on them from an image standpoint. And I think that, first of all, is the greatest thing.

There are a lot of other things that are of value in terms of the positive effect it has on the total community, again, along the same, along the same line. Now, from a tangible standpoint, if you move into the area, for example, of long-term loans on houses, to form an organization such as American Federal Savings and Loan Association that would lend money, possibly in an area that perhaps the other associations may have been a little skeptical of, at least in certain amounts, so that when that organization--this is American

Federal Savings and Loan Association, which is a black savings and loan formed a little over ten years or so ago, longer than that--

SF: Longer than ten years. It was in 1959.

HF: All right, not quite twenty but several years ago. It had a positive effect in that, whereas prior to that time, let's say, that savings and loans were skeptical of lending in a certain area above a certain amount, they were willing to sort of stretch and try this, because they knew the community, they knew the people involved. And, of course, as this began to happen, then the others began to do more of the same type of, type of thing.

Now I think that could carry over into others, including Greensboro National, of course, which you mentioned that I'm, I'm the president of. And this was one of the reasons, really, for my helping to organize that, that bank: the image thing that I mentioned, the idea of, of having a place where blacks could get experience in the area of finance.

Prior to our organization, no blacks sat on the board of a banking institution, at least in North Carolina, other than McKinnicks and Farmers Bank, which has its headquarters in Durham. There was not one in this general area, and no national bank where blacks sat on the board of the bank itself in North Carolina. So that I thought that this was one of the, one of the reasons.

Also, in the southeastern section of Greensboro, there was no banking institution. And I distinguish that now from a savings and loan association, which is a--which makes mortgages and has savings accounts. I'm thinking of a commercial bank that was not in the southeastern section of the city.

So this area was without that institution. And so that set a barrier of one of the things for my attempting to organize it, and of course, getting it organized, and, and working, working with it. I could talk on that subject, incidentally, for two hours.

SF: Yeah. I was going to say that was one of the interesting things about Henry, his determination.

When he first mentioned it to me, it was about four or five years after we were married. And he kept talking about a bank. And I said, "Oh, Henry, no, that's not possible. It just isn't possible." And Henry continued and continued and ended up with it.

HF: And she believed it when it began, when the building began to go up, you know.

SF: I couldn't project myself into the future to that point. And--

HF: She could physically see something going out there. It actually started in a trailer. And, of course, that was something that you could see, and therefore, it, she said, "well, it's going to be a reality."

SF: The reason I mention it is because Henry would say to me, he said, "You know, everything I've ever attempted to do, Shirley, you've always shown enthusiasm about it"-and I would always support him. I was really supporting him with the bank. But I couldn't visualize black people getting together with that, because I had not experienced it.

There are a lot of things that have happened to me that I haven't experienced, you know, that I hadn't experienced previously. But this seemed to be out of the realm of it. And I finally told him, "Henry, it just doesn't seem possible." And then after I saw it, it--

HF: Several hundred thousand dollars, also, which was required for capitalization, was a little more than both of us were accustomed to dealing with, so I'm sure that had some bearing, you know, on the--at least questionableness of the venture at the, at the beginning.

EP: I'd like to turn now, if I could, about something you have experienced. Specifically, in 1969 you were cited as one of five Mothers of the Year, and also president of the Greensboro YWCA. I'd like to know, what were the expansion efforts that occurred during your presidency at the YWCA?

SF: You know, when I think about that, I get butterflies to a point. I wasn't scheduled to be president of the YWCA. The president at that time--oh, my God, I, I've forgotten her name. But anyway, her husband was working at Western Electric. And he retired. And she wanted to travel with him.

And the interesting thing about it was, a number of YWCA people came out to my house to encourage me to do it and asked me if I would become president. So I agreed to do it. And at the time, we were in the process of building a new building, which was a six-hundred-and-fifty-thousand-dollar building.

And during the time, we also had some personnel problems. And personnel problems always are very sticky kinds of things, and you have to be very, very careful in how you handle it. And the community misunderstood what we were trying to do, and we were criticized extensively for that. But we managed to handle them, because I think that as president, we tried to be objective and tried to look at the skills and abilities of each person that was involved.

And I guess the important thing is that--was that, we had the confidence of the board. It was a board that believed in the YWCA and looked at the YWCA as what it could do, rather than individuals. And I think that's how we, we came out. We got

excellent cooperation from the president of United Way at that time, who was Stanley Frank.

And one of the interesting things about it was that United Way was about to withdraw funds because we were not a producing agency. And, and somehow we, with the skill and with determination by members of the board, we came out of it. And, and I don't think I can say that I made that change. I think it was the members of the board who decided that, as women, we could be businesswomen and we could make a difference. And I think this is what happened.

EP: Well, another aspect of your career, of course, has been your working in the area of special education, specifically as one of a five-person team for the State Department of Public Instruction to survey the problem of gifted children, and also as coordinator in special education for Bennett College for four years. What are the needs of special education and education in general in Guilford County and North Carolina as a whole?

SF: Well, they're tremendous. I guess I have a, a real desire for the underdog--and that's for lack of another word--and children who have problems satisfying their basic need, or, or reaching their potential goals, or what have you. And I had the opportunity to work with the State Department with the National Institute of Gifted and Talented in trying to assess what is actually happening to gifted and talented children.

At one time, gifted and talented included a special group. And with this nationwide study, we found that gifted and talented had no respect for race, creed, or color. They come in all sizes and all shapes and what have you. And because my professional background is in the area of exceptionality, it gave me a good opportunity to look at both ends of the curve, the normal curve, where we had the retarded children on the lower end and the gifted children on the upper end and all of the other exceptionalities that are now a part of it.

Guilford County--oh, I guess I--the better way to say it is Greensboro is moving along in the right direction, because it is now in the process of meeting the needs of all children with exceptionalities. They have a right to be educated and to meet their maximum. And I think this is what Greensboro is doing. I think Guilford County is on its way. And I have to specify Greensboro from Guilford County because I have been most involved in the area with Greensboro.

Now my professional job is with what we call direction services. And what we're actually doing is trying to find children whose needs are not being met and placing them in the kinds of environment, in the kinds of places that their needs can be met. And I think we're on the way to doing it.

HF: I've had the benefit of learning the--not learning completely, but at least being exposed to the change in emphasis--or perhaps it's a change in nomenclature in this whole area of what was special education at the time she first started with it.

At the time she was working on her masters in this, in this area, I was with her, of course. And everything was special education. And now I, I don't hear that as much, you know. It's, it's--if you notice, she said, exceptionalities. So apparently they're dressing up the language a little bit. And I've noticed that, that change just a little in this, this total area.

SF: It's not really dressing up the language. It's including all persons who are exceptional from the norm. No. They have a right to be recognized.

When you, when you think of special education in the past, it was only with the retarded child, with the blind child or with the crippled child. And now when we're saying exceptionalities, we now recognize that gifted and talented children also have problems. You find that the learning disabled child had problems and that we need to meet those needs as well.

HF: I happen to agree with you.

SF: Okay.

HF: I'm just saying that I think it has--the nomenclature has changed, has changed over the years. And, and I think there's a greater emphasis now in terms of realizing that the exceptional child does include that child who is very gifted or very talented, and who, therefore, perhaps doesn't fit into the normal everyday classroom activity any more so than the one who may be a little below the scale, as she says.

SF: You see I have to be very careful with Henry. I'm cross-examined often about some of the things that I say. And I get a little uptight when he starts, when he starts--

HF: When I get over into her field.

SF: Yeah--well, I think he doesn't really know what he's talking about. I have to think that he's on the right track now.

EP: Well, if we can turn now to your field, Representative Frye, and that is the legislature. You have a reputation among your colleagues as being a very dynamic legislator. I'd like to ask, what major accomplishments are you most proud of during your tenure in the General Assembly? And what do you believe still needs to be done that hasn't been done?

HF: I suppose my greatest satisfaction, in the first place, comes from what some might consider as a, as a loss in a way. And it grows out of my own experiences.

I worked in the legislature during my first term to get what I considered my major bill adopted by the House and the Senate. And that was a constitutional amendment--or at least passing the General Assembly--a constitutional amendment to abolish the literacy test in North Carolina.

And I was extremely interested in that, because after I had finished college and served two years in the United States Air Force as an officer, I went back to my hometown to register to vote and couldn't pass the literacy test. And--

SF: He couldn't answer who was the thirteenth president.

HF: No, I think it was some other president. And name the people who signed the Declaration of Independence and et cetera, et cetera. Anyway, a lot of questions that obviously no one should have to answer in order to be able to vote in North Carolina or anywhere else. And so when I was elected to the legislature, my--one of the main things I was going to do was to get that out of the North Carolina Constitution.

And without going through all the details, I was successful in getting it passed in the House and the Senate by the required votes. But the people turned it down at the election. But yet, I consider that one of the high points, being able to get it through, because few people gave it any chance of getting through the House and Senate at the, at the time. So that, to me, is one of my high--one of my highlights.

What remains to be done? That would take another day or so. We need legislation in many areas. We need some improvement in the landlord/tenant area. Only today, I got a call from a person who said that they had rented a house and made arrangements for, made a lease for two years, and they were having some very severe problems that they'd tried to get fixed, couldn't get it fixed. And they wanted to simply get the thing fixed and deduct it from their rent. But the law of North Carolina doesn't permit them to do that. Something ought to, that ought to be changed.

We could go into any number of other areas, which I won't try to do. But there's a lot of work to be, there's a lot of work to be done legislatively, some of which is going to be done, I think, in this session of the legislature. I think we're going to make some great progress in this term of the legislature. We have a great influence, as far as Piedmont [area] legislators are concerned, and I think we'll move in a progressive area.

The whole area of taxation needs to be made more equitable. And I don't know that we'll do that. But at least, hopefully, we'll lay the groundwork for that type of thing. The Equal Rights Amendment will come near to passing and may even pass this time in this, in this Assembly.

SF: Now I'm smiling. I'm not against the Equal Rights Amendment. But I, I was thinking of a card that Henry got today. And the person was asking him to fear God, and these are not the words, but it was something like that. That if he's fearful of God, then he would not vote for the Equal Rights Amendment. And yet, my name is on some literature that is going out supporting ERA. And I, I shudder to think what those people will think when--

HF: Well, that's a very controversial area and, and some people are very sincere about--in their opposition to it. And there are some, some things that could create problems with that. Everybody--you can take anything too far. You can take it to a ridiculous end. And I think this is what some of the people who are in opposition to the Equal Rights Amendment fear. That, that it will be--it will be taken to a ridiculous end. I don't think it will be. If I did, I would not, I would not support it.

EP: Well, inasmuch as you've mentioned one controversial subject, perhaps we could move on to several others. You also in 1969 sponsored a landlord/tenant act and also supported abolition of the death penalty. I was wondering if you could perhaps highlight your attitude toward these issues.

HF: Yes. Well, of course, the first thing I mentioned about the rent situation is what--that type of thing is what led to my introduction of bills relating to landlord/tenant. The--without going into detail again, a good part of the landlord/tenant law is law which is developed from the real property laws from England and the common law and bring it on over to the United States when really, rental agreements are more like contracts, agreements with promises between two equal people, quite often. And I think that the landlord/tenant law should be written more to in, in that type of, in that type of language and with that type of an approach. So, so that's the whole basis for my landlord/tenant legislation.

As far as the, the death penalty is concerned, of course, and obviously, a very controversial thing and people are, religiously, on both sides of the, of the issue; I'm convinced that we do not need capital punishment. I'm convinced that--in fact, I've studied it enough to know that in those states which do not have capital punishment, the crime rate is no worse than it is in the ones who have it. And in many places it's, it's not nearly as high where they do not have capital punishment. So from that angle, I don't see that it helps.

The real thing is that, that it's final. And if we make a mistake, which has been done, there's no way to correct it. And I would much rather save twenty people on death row for life, really, than to execute in the name of the government a, an innocent person for--that is, for a crime that the person did not, did not, did not commit.

And since it, it, it has not proved to be a deterrent, in the overall sense of the word, and because of that fact that it is so final and, and, and irretrievable, really, plus

many others that I could go on with, I have been in favor of abolishing it in North Carolina.

SF: I'm interested in knowing what our younger son's final result was in an English class at Grimsley. He wrote a term paper on crime, I mean, capital punishment as a deterrent to crime. I don't think he consulted with you on it, did he?

HF: Well, he mentioned it to me several times. And he checked out, I think, every book in the library on the subject. And I still have not seen his final work. I don't know whether he's ever finally finished it or not.

SF: Well, he's--he has turned it in, but I don't know what his final results were. But it's going to be interesting.

EP: Well, I imagine this issue has particular significance. North Carolina--

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EP: --more persons on death row in North Carolina than any other state in the country.

HF: Right. And we, of course, have one of the highest per capita murder rates in the country, also. And, well, if you go back into the history, at one point, capital punishment for stealing, anything, you know. So--I take that back as far as anything, there were some that would settle it. But we could go on and on, on that subject.

Another area which was not really controversial, but another one of those losses that changed later, my first term, I also introduced a bill to put into the North Carolina Uniform Commercial Code a provision relating to what is known as unconscionable contracts. And in effect, in layman's language, what that provision said was--or says--is that if a contract is made between two parties, and they come into court for enforcement of that contract, that the court can look at it and see if anybody, and both people in their right minds knowing the facts, situation and so forth, would really enter into a contract like that.

In other words, to enforce this contract, would it--is it so bad as to be unconscionable? And if that is the case, then the court could refuse to enforce that particular contract.

Well, that was a part of the Uniform Commercial Code, but when North Carolina adopted it, we took that out. And so I introduced a bill to put it back into it, in effect, and, and to adopt in North Carolina, which failed. But then the next term, somebody else introduced it, and it was put into the North Carolina law and, and there it is now. And I had the pleasure of being able to make a short speech supporting the bill which someone

else had introduced to put that back into the North Carolina law, which, incidentally, I think is a, is a good thing--probably not as strong as it, as it should be.

EP: Well, another piece of legislation that you had a great deal of input into was the anti-single shot voting bill. Could you describe what was the issue here and the ultimate outcome?

HF: Well, in when you have an election that involves more than one person for a particular race. Let's say in the legislative race, for example, here's a county that has five legislators, for example. You can go into--to the polls and vote for just one person.

Well, the anti-single shot legislation would say, you can't go in and vote for one person. You've got to vote for at least--not at least--but you've got to vote for five. In other words, there are ten people running, five to be elected. The anti-single shot legislation would say: you've got to vote for five persons. You cannot single shot. You cannot pick out one person and say, "Well, this is the person I want to be elected, and that's all I'm gonna vote for."

But I think a person ought to have a right to do that. And so every time since I've been in the legislature that the question has come up, I have fought legislation which would prevent a person from going in and voting for one person. And I've forgotten the outcome the first time it came up. But it is not, it is not good legislation in my opinion.

EP: Is it the current situation now that a person is prevented by law from doing this, or--

HF: No. In Guilford County--and I think I'm correct in that generally throughout the state now, you can vote for one or more, any number up to the number who are actually running, not who are actually running, but the number to be elected for a particular, for a particular office.

EP: Well, the--concerning your bills you have supported and your voting record, the--your record with the--North Carolina, the interest of consumers has been a very good one. I'd like to touch upon that.

HF: Could, could I interrupt?

EP: Sure.

HF: In talking about various things, a major area that I've left out, and that relates to the area of elections and election laws. I've been on the Election Laws Committee two or three times since I've been in the legislature. But I was also chairman of the subcommittee that rewrote the laws relating in North Carolina to absentee voting. And we've made it in

North Carolina very easy for persons to vote by absentee ballot. In other words, we've simplified it and, at the same time, kept in safeguards, so that you don't have people voting three and four times and that type of thing.

But at one time it was almost impossible to vote absentee ballot. It was so difficult, you know, so much red tape to go through and everything. It was hard to do. But we changed that, and, and fixed it so that it's easy to, easy to do it. And I think that's one of the reforms that have been good. And we rewrote, incidentally, the entire election laws of North Carolina, made them more modern. And we have fair, fairly good election law system in North Carolina.

Another area, which most people don't know that I was really involved very much in, relates to municipal government in North Carolina and the rewrite of the laws in terms of the powers of cities to operate in North Carolina. I served on the local government study commission, which Sam Johnson from Raleigh was chairman. And we met over the summer, time and time again, looking at those, that whole series of laws, and, in fact, rewriting it to have an up-to-date law, as far as municipal government in North Carolina is concerned.

And these are the type of things that don't make very big headlines and, and really don't--and really it's the kind of thing that's a little dull. But I think in the long run, they have a great impact on the good of the country.

EP: Well, when you were, you stated when you were elected in 1968 that you felt an obligation to speak out on black issues. What are some of these issues?

HF: Well, I think, again, in the area of election laws, that's one of them. The thing like anti-single shot voting. One of the ways that blacks have been able to get into the legislature and into other elected positions in North Carolina, and incidentally, in other parts of the country, has been through the use of the single shot vote. In other words, there are five to be elected, and let's say the black vote constitutes thirty percent of the total. If they concentrate that vote on one person, they can get one person in, but if they spread it out over five persons, he loses.

So I have--that's been, that's been an area. And that is an, an issue that gets into--not black, as such--but minority, any minority that's trying to get someone elected. The same thing as far as numbered seats are concerned. There was legislation to, for example, proposed at one point even for Guilford County to number the seats. So that, again, let's say you have five seats. Instead of having ten people running at large for five and the highest the persons with the five, the five persons with the highest number of votes getting elected, you would have to name which seat you're running for, so that you would have to run against a specific person. And generally, I have opposed that type of thing for the same reason again--that it's difficult to get minorities into those types of situations.

And in the whole area of election laws, we've had a lot of things in that, in that general area, which is a very basic one.

You get the same thing in the reorganization of higher education in North Carolina. There was the question of black representation on the policy-making board. We consolidated everything into the University of North Carolina, that is, the public colleges and, and universities. Well, at that time, the University of North Carolina board had no blacks on it--this big board with no blacks at all.

Well, I figured, with having a fourth of the population, and a large number of the students, and so forth that it was important that blacks be in on the policy making. So I insisted in writing into that law that a certain--out of every number elected, at least one--I've forgotten the exact numbers now--had to be of the, of a minority race. And there were some other safeguards that we had to have for women and Republicans and so forth. But this was an issue that I thought was important.

Now, along that same line, the whole thing of how the money of North Carolina is distributed as for education, higher education, for the various institutions and things of this nature, that's probably a very key one of where does the money go and how is it divided up, you know. And this is an issue that blacks are very concerned about, because for those institutions which are either controlled by blacks or those where a large number go, it's important that they get the financing that is needed, hopefully proportionately, or in some cases, they need a little more, than the, than the others. So this has been an area that I've tried to watch, watch very closely.

Also, any issue that affects poor people, as such, or that affects consumers primarily, in a way, is a sort of a black issue in North Carolina and nationwide, because a majority of blacks fall into the category of the consumer rather than the producer in terms of manufacturing and all this type of thing. And, of course, a majority of them fit into the area of the poor. In other words, a larger percentage are at the lower level economically than at the higher level. So a good part of my work in the legislature, even though it has not been black/white, you know, this type of thing, it, it has been in issues and areas where I felt blacks were, were very much concerned.

EP: How would you respond to charges that the General Assembly is in need of streamlining? I know there have been a number of suggestions, among them: making the president pro tem and speaker of the house sustaining positions, fewer legislative committees, an increased research staff of the legislators. What was your reaction to these?

HF: Well, we have reformed some in the legislature since I have, since I've been there. At the time I went in, we had--even though we were called the most powerful legislature in the United States--because of the fact that our governor does not have the veto power, and therefore, an act passed by the General Assembly of North Carolina becomes law--in that sense, it was called the most powerful one.

In fact, generally in the--as far as money matters were concerned, we were not as powerful as it appeared. And the reason was because the legislature did not have any staff, any independent staff. It relied on the governor's staff for its work. And so, really, they, the governor, really controlled, to a large extent, with minor exceptions of course, what was appropriated, because it supplied the background information and, and then the, and the information for drafting the bills and, and the projections, and everything.

Well, we have since then set up a fiscal research area which can give us independent--analyze things, you know, and help us to make independent decisions and a legislative research section, which is a continuing thing, which gives the legislature a greater independence and, and basically, this is a streamlining of things.

We've had some other things relating to ethics and that type of thing. The effect of which I'm still debating as to whether it creates as much problems as it solves. We've gone to electronic voting in the Senate, and we're going to electronic voting in the House, which I think will be good. It will let it be open a little bit more in terms of knowing how people vote and this type of thing. So I think we are making some reforms in the, in the right direction.

They've increased the pay of legislators, probably not enough. And I--you may--some may not consider that a reform, but I do, because of the fact that there were those earlier who felt that, well, legislators ought to do it as a public service. But who can afford to do it as a public service? Generally those who are wealthy, you see. Those who are less wealthy, or who can't afford to do it as a public service because they've got their families back to take care of, so by increasing the pay and this type of thing, it, it allows you to be a little more independent and less dependent upon others to buy you dinners and things of that nature. So I think that's a reform in a, in a way.

EP: Would you--I gather then, that you wouldn't be opposed or have not been opposed to annual sessions and the ability of the General Assembly to call itself into special session. I know there are some people who consider this turning into a professional legislation, or legislature.

HF: Yeah. Right. I, I supported the trial annual sessions. And I suppose the jury's still out as to whether, overall, that is the best thing. And the reason I said that is, the question is whether or not we should have, in my own opinion, whether or not we should have just regular annual sessions, or whether we should have two-year sessions for the general, for the general session, and then in the odd years simply meet to adjust the budget. I'm still open as to between those two which is the better, better thing to do.

It does create a problem--the, the idea of meeting every year. But I think with some control on it, limiting the sessions and meeting later in the year--there's no need of meeting in January every year. But if we met for a regular session and then met again,

say, the next year in April for a month, this would probably be, this would probably be good.

EP: Well, what in your opinion has been the impact of the Guilford County delegation on state politics and state legislative acts?

HF: It rises and falls. At the time when Joe Hunt was the speaker, I suppose it was fairly high. It dropped down some, and perhaps even more so, as far as state matters were concerned, during the time that the Republican administration was in the governor's office. And the speakers of the House were either from the east or more tuned to them during the last, last session, and probably the one before that, to some extent.

I think it will--the Guilford delegation's status--will rise a little bit in, in this session, partially because we have a, a speaker who I believe is a little more attuned toward the urban interests. And, as a matter of practical politics, because practically all of us supported the particular Speaker of the House for this time, and I think he will include most of us in on the decision making for the legislature. So I think that the impact will be, will be greater. And we do have the largest Democratic delegation in the General Assembly and second only to Mecklenburg in terms of the state as a total delegation.

EP: If I could focus in a little more narrowly now, what--you were elected chairman of the delegation. I'd like to know, what do you feel has been your impact into state legislature?

HF: I'm not sure it's easy to assess your own, your own impact. I think my, during my first term, when I was the only black person there and being a black person there for the first time this century, that the first impact was that, well, here he is, so that, if you're getting ready to decide something that specifically involves blacks, maybe we ought to see what he thinks about it, you know. Or at least he's here, and let's--what effect, you know--what, what do you think about this particular thing? And I think just my presence there had a positive influence.

As time went on, I think that most of them, hopefully, gained some respect for my ability to do things. I--during my first few terms, I read almost every bill meticulously. And usually, I think, when I began to ask questions, they could realize that I was reading them and was catching some things that possibly might not have been caught had I, had I [not] been there. So that simply asking a question about things, I think, made a difference.

And I found that especially true in the area of appropriations. When the budgets were presented from the executive branch, many times I would ask questions, sometimes without really knowing what I was asking. And the person would immediately get defensive. And pretty soon, I found out that they were hiding something. And in the

course of it, things would come out that I think in the long run have been good, good for the state.

During my last term, we had four blacks in the House and two in the Senate. And I found myself then more able to concentrate on things that I was interested in working on and letting some of the newer black members raise specific black problems and, you know, and deal with them. So I think I've had a good impact. Of course, that's my assessment, you know.

And, of course, as chairman of the delegation, I found my role being one of trying to do two things. One is to be sure that everybody in the delegation had an opportunity to be involved in things as it related to Guilford County on all local matters.

We brought them before the delegation, and we discussed them freely and, and fully. And then the delegation took a position one way or the other on, on the various matters. And we had an understanding that nobody in the delegation introduced anything that was a local bill without first bringing it to the delegation and letting us, letting us act on it.

So that the two things that--if I haven't made them clear--is, number one, that we each express our opinions, for or against. We do not have to agree. But we can agree--I mean, but we can, we can, we can disagree without being disagreeable, I guess that's what I want to say.

In other words, I've said many times that I don't expect us to be in unity, but I expect us to be in harmony. And the difference being that even though we don't think alike, we don't agree on, on things, at least when we've gotten our varying views together, we can reach a consensus as far as Guilford County's concerned. And I, I think, I think we did that.

EP: I'd like to turn now, Mrs. Frye, is it your viewpoint as a wife of a legislator, as the wives--what activities the wives are involved in and your activities in Raleigh in your own right.

SF: Well, they were fascinating, especially the first year, because I think that because Henry was the first black in the legislature--that's this century--that the wives were also very anxious to find out what kind of wife he had. And I was very anxious in finding out what kind of people they were. And the people allowed me to be an individual. I had no real problem whatsoever. I participated freely in whatever I chose to participate.

And last year, it was two years ago in the last session, I was an officer of the Sir Walter Cabinet. And it proved to be a very challenging experience and I found many friends as a part of the legislature.

I always enjoyed it. And I, I learned a lot. And one of the things that I think I, I learned directly from Henry, and that was when he was presenting his bill on the death penalty. I was in the gallery during the time that he was managing on the floor. And some of the legislators would get up, and they were speaking their convictions. And they were

so much against what he was saying. And I got so angry. I was so angry. I was so emotionally involved. And then when we came back to his office, one legislator who spoke so--well, it wasn't bitter, but I felt it as being bitter--against what he was saying--and came in and said, Henry, I think you did a good job on the floor. And I said, what does he mean by being a--that you did a good job? And Henry said, well, you win some and you lose some.

And the thing that I learned was that you, you're on the floor, you have differences of opinion and you accept those, but once you come out, you're friends again. And it was something that I learned to appreciate, that you can disagree with people, and yet you can be friends as you come out. And it's a challenging experience. And I guess we're blessed to have the kinds of sons that we had, because they have allowed me to participate in the activities without being disagreeable.

And I, and I guess it's because I guess I, I shouldn't--well, I guess I should say it--but I think Henry's a fantastic person. And not only is he my husband, but he's my best friend. And we have an opportunity to express, and we disagree on some things. And he makes it possible for the boys to be happy and for me to be happy at the same time while he is involved in the legislature. And I think that that comes from being a good manager. And I don't guess I say that he's a manager. We are co-managers of the household.

HF: I thought you were giving me credit for running things.

SF: No. Because I do get the opportunity to express myself and do the things that I like to do. And I, I don't think I could do it, what I'm doing, being involved in the community and work with the boys, if he did not agree, if he were not cooperative in what I attempted to do.

EP: Well, I'm wondering if we could sum this session up by asking what legislation that will come up in this legislature in the future, if you could, will have the greatest impact to Guilford County, and if you could briefly summarize what this legislation would be and your participation in it?

HF: That's a rather difficult question. I'm not sure that I have the answer to it.

I think that probably, coming out of the recession or whatever you want to call it, the key thing this year is going to be which way the economy goes and whether or not we have jobs for people, whether or not we expand in the sense of bringing in higher-paying industry, and a little more diversification and things of that nature.

Where the legislature probably has an influence, but the, really, the greatest influence is probably in the executive, executive branch of the government in terms of the approach that it takes toward the, toward the whole thing. And I think we're going in the

right direction, incidentally, on--in that area. And I think the legislature will be supportive of it.

And in that sense, I think it'll help the state and, of course, really, Guilford County, Greensboro is a part of it, so I think that will be, that will be beneficial. I don't know of any real controversial matters, at least as far as Guilford County is concerned, that, that will be coming up. Now that we've got a new chairman, I'm letting him worry about Guilford County specifically.

EP: Well, I think this has been a very good insight into your careers in the community and in, in the legislature, and I appreciate your letting us have insight into that and participating in our program.

SF: Thank you.

HF: Thank you.

EP: This has a project, a tape of the Oral History project. It was filmed at the Greensboro Public Library on January fourth of 1977.

[End of Interview]