

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

INTERVIEWEE: William A. Thomas

INTERVIEWER: Eugene E. Pfaff

DATE: July 5 and 9, 1979

EUGENE PFAFF: Mr. Thomas?

WILLIAM THOMAS, JR.: Yes.

EP: First of all, I need to get on tape that you are aware that this conversation is being taped.

WT: That's correct.

EP: And that we have your permission to so tape this conversation.

WT: That, that is correct.

EP: Thank you. I'd like to begin by asking you to describe the formation of CORE [Congress of Racial Equality] in the early 1960s in Greensboro.

WT: Okay. CORE was formed really as a result of the national philosophy of the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] not really embracing nonviolent direct action. What I mean by nonviolent direct action is the tactic of actually physically demonstrating at particular places of business in order to focus attention on the inequities that existed at the time. At that particular time, the NAACP's basic tactic was through the courts, through legal action. And we felt as a result of the sit-in that more was needed.

And at the time that CORE was started in Greensboro, I was president of the youth chapter of the NAACP. And through the then-president of the adult branch, Dr. George Simkins, he contacted James Farmer, who was national executive director of CORE at the time, inquiring about the possibilities of forming a CORE chapter in Greensboro. And through those efforts a CORE chapter was, in fact, initiated.

EP: What time period would this have been? Nineteen sixty-two?

WT: Let's see. That's where I get foggy, in terms of dates. It has been some time. Let's see. I graduated from A&T [North Carolina A&T State University] in '66. My first year then would have been '61, because I was out a year. So that had to be in 1959 or '60. When did the sit-ins start?

EP: February of 1960.

WT: Okay. So it had to be '60 then.

EP: Who were the principal officers and members of the executive board at this time?

WT: Of CORE?

EP: Yes.

WT: You're making it very difficult. You're really picking my memory. Let's see. I was chairman of CORE at the time. Reverend A. Knighton Stanley was on the executive board. There were several students from Bennett [College]. I believe a Regina Carpenter was secretary. Dr. Laizner was on the executive board, and at one time she held an office. At one time Lewis Brandon was on the executive board. He held an office.

EP: I understand that Mr. Patterson was a vice-chairman.

WT: Yes, Robert ["Pat"] Patterson was an officer and on the executive board.

EP: How would you describe race relations in Greensboro at this time?

WT: Well, Greensboro is sort of a funny town. We, we always had a fairly moderate atmosphere in compared to areas, say, in the Deep South. Greensboro was a bit more progressive and has always been a bit more progressive than, you know, a lot of towns in, in the Deep South. And not only the Deep South, but even in Virginia, say, like Danville. We never really had the physical overt type of problems, the overt type of racism in Greensboro that they had in other types of, I mean other parts of the country. But it still existed.

It was a very paternalistic attitude existing in Greensboro. We still had Jim Crow signs. We had problems with employment. We could not eat in the cafeterias and the dime stores, et cetera. It existed, but it wasn't a hostile type of existence. And even the response to the overt demonstrations that went on was not hostile the way it was in other parts of the country.

But we had our problems. And, you know, I'm sure that in many ways they still exist, but on a more moderate level than comparing to other parts of the country.

EP: I'm going to ask you, in as much detail as possible, for you to describe the sequence of events that led up to the mass demonstrations in May. The newspaper credits the first major demonstration as May eleventh, when CORE went to McDonald's on Summit Avenue.

WT: Well, it's very difficult at this point to really remember in detail the sequences that existed. I first became involved my senior year in high school. I was a student at Dudley [High School]. That was during the summer, I guess, of '60 right after the sit-ins first started.

Initially, the students at A&T [cough] felt that the high school students were too young to actually be involved in the sit-ins [cough]. But they found that the situation was not going to be resolved by the time that school was out, in that many of the students that initially were participating in the demonstrations, et cetera, were from out of town, and they wanted to carry it on. So that's when the high school students actually initially got involved. And we formed a CORE chapter at that particular point.

The--it was basically high school students and local participants from the Greensboro area that maintained the demonstrations during that initial summer. Our activities consisted of basically picketing the dime stores, passing out leaflets, negotiating. I think Mayor [David] Schenck may have been the mayor at that time. He formed a committee. Don Prego, of Prego-Guyes [Women's Store]--very influential--he was involved in it. But anyway, we, if I recall correctly, I think during that summer we initiated a boycott of the entire downtown area and then just basically picketing, et cetera.

EP: Was it a periodic thing over--say, between '60 and '63--or were there continuous activities, continuous meetings, that kind of thing?

WT: Yes. Activities were continuous from the beginning of the sit-ins. We always had open communications with the political structure as well as the business structure. And actually what really triggered the massive demonstrations was an inability on the part of the political and business structure to really take the damn thing serious.

They attempted to--because we didn't have the violent outbreaks and disturbances that existed in other parts of the country, they thought that the thing was going to go away. They attempted to just ignore us. And in fact, at one point Mayor Schenck did not even want to negotiate with the students. He suggested that perhaps we send some more respectable, mature adults down to negotiate with them. And we quickly informed him and the other committee that it was not the mature adults that were out in the street. And

if he wanted us out of the street, he had to sit down and talk to us, which he eventually did. And that's when the problems were eventually worked out.

But that was a real big hurdle, to get them to sit down at a table, and look at us as mature people that had a mission, and to begin to negotiate with some degree of equality, you know, give and take, and go ahead and resolve problems.

EP: It's my understanding that there were picketing, there was picketing of the S&W and Mayfair cafeterias in the fall of '62.

WT: That's correct.

EP: Was that a long duration? Was anything accomplished during that time?

WT: Well, you know, the S&W and Mayfair were really just symbols. It was S&W, Mayfair--they may have been some of the last things to have actually integrated. If I remember correctly, I think Woolworth's and, maybe, Kress was open at that time. They had been the first ones to actually open up their lunch counter.

EP: So this is more or less a continuation of the sit-ins?

WT: That's correct. From the sit-ins it went to other business establishments, not only in the downtown area but--McDonald's is an example--outside of the downtown area. It spread it not only from a demand to actually sit down and buy a hot dog, but the opportunity to earn the money to buy a hot dog. If we were going to spend money in Woolworth's, then we wanted salespeople in there. We wanted, you know, the entire work force integrated. So that's--the entire thing just snowballed.

EP: Dr. Laizner has told me that the mayor urged the CORE chapter to suspend activities until the report of his committee, and--which was supposed to come out some time in February--and that, she said that CORE decided to go to overt demonstrations, return to overt demonstrations when the committee urged desegregation of public facilities but said in the last paragraph [of the report] that they had no power to enforce such a resolution. And she said at that point, then, there was the picketing of city hall. The thing that interests--is that--if you agree with that assessment.

WT: That's more or less accurate. Again, I don't remember the details or the sequences. I do know that a report came out. And there probably was a so-called cooling-off period or suspension of actual demonstrations. But they did resume. But go ahead.

EP: She says then that you called a meeting, a mass meeting of CORE, in the spring, in early May, and--with the question as to whether there would be attempts at demonstrations at that time, even though it was very close to exams, or to wait until the fall. Could you describe the, your motivation behind calling that meeting and what were the principal issues?

WT: I don't recall the exact meeting that Dr. Laizner is speaking of. And I'm not even sure she's speaking of the spring when we had massive demonstrations and they actually had people locked up down at the old polio hospital. I guess that's what she's talking about.

The only thing I can recall is that the negotiations, like I indicated, went on and on and on. And I'm one that believes that you can't really negotiate unless there's a certain degree of equality. If you don't have some pressure on people--and when I mean equality, I mean equality of power. And our power was disrupting the city, disrupting the economic flow of the community to the extent that someone had to take notice, someone had to listen.

Until we could keep that constant pressure on them, on the powers to be, rather than to negotiate, you were begging. There was not a give and take. And that's how they viewed us. They viewed us from a position of power. And in order to sort of equalize our position where we could go in and make certain demands--not beg, say, "Give me," we said, "We are demanding"--then you had to apply pressure to the powers to be in order to achieve your goals.

And it was not until we totally disrupt[ed] the city that they begin to listen and begin to recognize that they could not go down and talk to some of the old-time black leaders that they were used to talking to to get these kids out of the street. If they wanted these kids out of the street, then they had to talk to the kids, because we were the ones in the streets. That was our source of power.

EP: The impression I get from reading the newspaper is, though, that these committees that were formed to meet or negotiate with the various managers of the businesses that were targeted, were, indeed, the--with the exception of Reverend Stanley and several of the younger ministers--were, indeed, members of the adult black community. Does this suggest a contradiction, an attempt to get around the students, or what?

WT: No. That--see, that came, that came later on. Initially, it was basically the students. But as the demonstrations progressed and as time progressed, we had practically the entire adult community involved in what we were doing.

Reverend [Otis] Hairston was very active. There were any number of adults that were active, from ministers to lawyers to school teachers to just plain ordinary black people that were concerned. So the community at large did, in fact, become involved. And through the Greensboro Citizens Association and the NAACP, adults were involved.

But I think that if you were to examine those committees, you would see that up until the time the demonstrations actually ceased, the basic nucleus was, in fact, the students.

EP: Why was McDonald's selected as the first target on Summit Avenue?

WT: I don't really know, quite honestly. [both laugh] I just do not recall. I don't know if an incident had occurred. I don't know if it was because of the close proximity to the school. I just really don't know.

I remember marching out Summit Avenue at night. I don't know why McDonald's--maybe because of the national chain--I, I just don't know.

EP: How were the meetings called that got the--it seems to me at first, Dr. Laizner said that there were about, around forty-some members of CORE. And that initially, the first four days of demonstration at McDonald's was principally CORE and then the large number of students became involved.

WT: That's true.

EP: How was it communicated to get--to have these mass meetings, and how was it organized?

WT: All right. Well, that was really very easy. If you would look back at the campuses at the time, you had basically two campuses, that was A&T and Bennett. And it was very easy to get word around through the campuses because everyone was just right there. And once students knew what was going on, you know, it had a snowballing effect.

But we utilized the media. We utilized leaflets. The local churches were very cooperative in permitting us to use their churches for mass meetings. We had smaller meetings where we discussed what we were about and what we were trying to do. And just through basic, community organizational type of techniques, we were able to get people out, especially the students. Like I said, it was easy.

Later on, after some of the emotionalism wore off, we actually had community meetings in neighborhood churches, and community centers, and people's homes. And we would actually go out into the community, explain to them what was going on, encouraging them to boycott certain stores until this thing is done, encourage them to get involved, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera.

EP: Could you describe what proposed courses of action, alternative forms of tactics or goals were discussed in the planning sessions of the executive committee?

WT: Well, again, the overall emphasis was--once we realized that it would take some type of overt action to have, to make the powers to be to recognize our legitimate gripes--then the overall strategy was, we must interrupt the economic flow of this community until we can force the business community to actually force the politicians to make the decision that had to be made, or vice versa--the political community to force the business community.

Sanction number one was to withdraw spending your money in downtown Greensboro--not only at Woolworth's or S&W, but all of the stores. To force people like Don Prego--who was, like I said, was very influential--to put pressure on, you know, Woolworth's, or Boyd Morris at S&W, or the rest of his business associates that he met with at the Chamber of Commerce or at the other service clubs, and say, "Look, I'm losing money because you're being foolish." So it was the economic sanction.

The economic sanction did not only come from encouraging the community to withhold their dollars, but also, because of the potential disruptive nature of the demonstrations, other people were afraid to come downtown.

EP: Do you think that the boycott was successful?

WT: Oh, yes. They felt it economically.

EP: Was the shift from a small number of CORE members to McDonald's a couple of weeks before exams were scheduled to begin, to the mass demonstration with thousands of students and adults involved, was that spontaneous or was it planned?

WT: Well, again, the whole entire thing had a snowballing effect. We were able to plan some of it to a certain extent. We knew how to utilize mass media. We knew how to utilize the emotionalism, the sensationalism, in order to get people out.

People respond to crisis. Sometimes you had to create crisis in order to get the community response that was needed. And at times we did that. At times we, we--you were forced to create a situation, maybe even with the police, or to force them to actually make an arrest and then utilize it through your media to, you know, create the type of sensationalism that you wanted in order to get more people involved. So to a certain extent some of it was spontaneous. You would use the spontaneity of it to achieve the goal that you were after.

EP: Was it your decision to ask Jesse Jackson to participate in the marches?

WT: Yes, it was.

EP: And on what basis did you make that decision?

- WT: Based on, on Jesse's, you might say, popularity at school. He was an athlete. He was involved in student government. And at that time we had very few athletes involved. And it, it proved to be a very good move.
- EP: Was he more or less just for show or as someone on which the media and the students could focus? Or did he have any planning input?
- WT: Initially, Jesse's main contribution was who Jesse was. In terms of actually sitting down and taking care of the details in planning, Jesse was not initially involved. Later on he did become quite actively involved in the [unclear], yes. Initially he was not.
- EP: Was there good cooperation between you and he?
- WT: Oh, we never had a problem in terms of that. I believe in utilizing the talents of people around me. And even at a very early age, Jesse demonstrated a great deal of what I would call charisma. He was an excellent public speaker. He could create the type of emotionalism that was needed. And I am not that type of person. I never wanted to be a preacher, a professional civil righter. I was responding to a cause. And I look at myself as more of a tactician, as a detail person, as a person that can get a job done. And I think that because we were so different, we worked very well together.
- EP: What is your attitude of how the police handled the situation?
- WT: I think it goes back to my initial comments. Greensboro handled it in a very moderate fashion. I think that, but for the way they handled it, we would have had a very explosive situation. So even in that time, I would commend Captain [William] Jackson for, you know, the insight that he had during that particular time. I think he was probably a bit advanced in terms of how a lot of police departments all over the country [were] reacting.
- EP: Did you have much interaction in terms of meeting, or telephone, or face-to-face conversations with he and the other leaders of the city?
- WT: Oh, sure. I was involved with practically every meeting that went on during the time that I was there.
- EP: What was your attitude toward Mayor [David] Schenck?
- WT: I think Mayor Schenck, God bless his soul, meant well. But he had very little understanding of what was really going on. I don't think that he really controlled the city

as mayor. I don't really know who he was reporting to, but he did not impress me as being a man of initiative or of very much leadership ability.

EP: Did the--

WT: Excuse me. Go ahead.

EP: Did the [city] council exercise any kind of leadership role? They sound pretty passive.

WT: They, they were very passive. And this is why the whole thing went on as long as it did, was because no one in the white community would actually pick up the ball and run with it.

EP: Well, to whom do you credit the breakthrough in negotiations? I know there was Dr. [George] Evans' committee--as a matter of fact, there were three committees, as I understand. Do you think that these committees had any impact?

WT: The committee was a vehicle by which the actual discussions took place. I was on Dr. Evans' committee, too, okay. I was involved in all of the negotiations. But it wasn't the committees.

What had happened--the business community decided that, hey, I want these black people out of the street so I can make the dollar. That's what brought it about. The business community realized that they were losing money. They were embarrassed by what was going on because it really focused--it showed the world that, hey, Greensboro is not the nice little quaint town that they wanted it to be.

You got big industry there. You had Burlington Mills. You got Cone Mills. You got other major industries that had an economic stake in the, in maintaining some semblance of peace in Greensboro. So it was that whole disruptive tactic that we were able to bring about that created an atmosphere where these people that were on the committees could actually sit down and began to intelligently work out the problems.

EP: Well, you sound--and reading back over the newspapers after the demonstrations ceased--you know, I believe the last large demonstration was June seventh. And then there was the formation of the permanent Human Relations Committee. And occasionally you were interviewed by the newspaper. And you sounded pretty angry, actually, at the pace of the progress that the committee was enacting, and perhaps even the basic philosophy of the white businessmen who were on it, principally Chairman W. O. Conrad. Were you, indeed, angry about this?

WT: Yes, I am, and even more so when you talk about the pace now. They really were not in tune with what was really needed. The white community basically had a philosophy--put off for tomorrow, you know, wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, wait. Well, when you're dealing with such fundamental rights, it's very difficult to accept the pace that they wanted us to follow, you know. There was no reason not for any black person not to be angry. If you look at, you know, where we are now in Greensboro, and throughout the country, you can see that we've been traveling at a snail's pace, at a turtle's pace, if at any pace at all.

EP: You said that--that next fall, there was an interview with you in early September--and you said that demonstrations might begin again. And there were some picketing of, there was some picketing of the Oaks Motel and the Travelodge. But there was never again that large demonstration. Why, why were large demonstrations not resumed?

WT: Well, again, I think you probably have to look at what was happening throughout the country. And as I had mentioned earlier, people are basically crisis-oriented. At that particular time there was no real crisis, and it's awfully difficult to maintain the level of intensity that we had during the peak of those mass demonstrations. The only way that would happen again, it would have to be a response to a crisis, to create that high level of emotionalism.

It's very difficult for people to stop what they're doing. In other words, to function in a normal way, you know, to go to work, to come home, to cook, to cut their lawn, to go to the barbershop, to shop, in order to participate in that. That's abnormal. And because it was abnormal, you had to have some something to motivate you. And unless it was a crisis, it would be impossible to maintain that level of intensity.

Some goals were achieved. We did not have the Bull Connor [Alabama segregationist] that kept something going, or just kept black folk just angry as hell as the time. You know there was no crisis.

EP: Well, what was your, would be your attitude at the assessment by Elliott Rudwick and August Meier in *CORE: A Study in the Civil Rights Movement, 1942-1968*, that said that the Greensboro demonstrations were only of mixed success. And they attributed this to the Greensboro adult black community was just tired, worn out by three major pushes at desegregation, and that it was very difficult to get the students motivated again that next fall.

WT: Number one, I don't even know who these people are. Who are these people, anyway?

EP: Well, they wrote a book, August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, entitled *CORE: A Study in the Civil Rights Movement, 1942-1968*.

WT: Well, I don't know who they interviewed. They never contacted me. I don't know of anyone else that they actually contacted. I have to take issue with their entire statement. I don't know what assessment they actually made. But I, I--excuse me. [speaking to an unidentified individual in the background] I'm on a long distance phone call. Take a number for me, please.

I totally disagree with their assessment. I think that for what we set out to accomplish, we, in fact, accomplished. The demonstrations not only led to a desegregation of lunch counters and other eating facilities in Greensboro, but it led to employment opportunities for blacks. It was a snowball in terms of the whole black awareness in terms of the political arena, for the registration for minorities, you know, the entire thing.

So, I don't know what type of successes they were looking for, but I know from whence we started and what happened. I think it was very successful. And we did have the black community involved. Not only lay people, but the so-called middle-class blacks were involved. I mean, they were not out front all the time, but they were involved, and we did get support from them.

EP: Do you think much was accomplished voluntarily or do you think that--

WT: No. They didn't give up anything. They, they were forced to give up whatever was accomplished. And, again, I think it was economic sanctions and just the potential, the potential explosive situation that existed, the potential violent situation that existed. They didn't want that in, in Greensboro.

EP: Do you think that many businesses were desegregated prior to the Civil Rights Act of [19]64, or do you think it took that to get large-scale desegregation in Greensboro?

WT: Well, if you're talking about Woolworth's, you had a few salespeople. But if you're talking about Cone Mill[s] and other major companies, you know, then it took the civil rights legislation. And you still don't have full employment opportunities, not only in Greensboro but it's throughout the country--north, east, west, or wherever you want to go.

EP: Do you think that Greensboro's reputation as a liberal or progressive or at least moderate city in the South was a myth, or do you think there was some validity in that viewpoint?

WT: I think that certainly there was some validity. You know, like I said, we--I mean even in terms of just how the police responded. You know, it could have been a very explosive situation. But they responded positively, I would say.

In, in many ways, Greensboro is much more moderate than other areas of the country. But that does not mean that we did not have racist attitudes existing, or that still exist. But their reaction to it was a little, a little bit differently.

EP: What was the significance, if any, that the Greensboro demonstrations had in terms of the demonstrations that were going on all over the country? Do you think it was just one of many, or do you think it had a certain uniqueness?

WT: Well, in terms of the sit-ins, that's where it got started.

EP: I was thinking more in terms of 1963.

WT: Uniqueness, I don't know. I, I really don't know whether or not there was any high degree of uniqueness or not. I think you probably would find similar prototypes all over the country. I'm just not in a position to say.

[Telephone call ends. The audio begins with Mr. Pfaff redialing Mr. Thomas and a brief exchange between Mr. Pfaff and another employee at Mr. Thomas's place of business is heard.]

EP: Mr. Thomas?

WT: Yes.

EP: This is Eugene Pfaff again.

WT: Yes.

EP: I'd like to continue our discussion, if I may, at this time.

WT: Okay. Fine.

EP: One point that I didn't get to in our last conversation was the determination of the specific goals that CORE was seeking in the spring of 1963. Was it for complete desegregation of all public facilities in Greensboro, or was it a broader program encompassing the labor force and other private, as well as public, facilities?

WT: Specifically responding to your question, I do not recall exactly what all the actual goals were in, what was that, '63?

EP: Yes.

WT: [Nineteen] sixty-three. By way of, of trying to answer, let me give you some history as to how our goals developed, or evolved, you might say.

Initially with the sit-ins, the specific goal was basically to desegregate the lunch counter facilities. That spread from lunch counters in five and dime stores and other types of facilities to all types of public eating facilities within the Greensboro area.

After that, we began to focus in on employment in these types of places, specifically employment in the areas where we were spending our money. Not only in terms of, again, five and dime stores, but also in areas such as your major department stores, wherein you had a large number of minority people patronizing the stores. And from that, then other types of goals along that line began to develop and evolve.

Now, to answer specifically in 1963 what the exact goals were, I don't know. The only thing I can say is that it expanded from just the desegregation of public accommodations to employment, to increased voting rights, to the whole area of human rights that we now focus on.

EP: Is there any one individual or a small group of individuals that you could identify as being responsible for planning strategy?

WT: Well, again, you know, Greensboro's fortunate in that it had quite a few people that were involved at different times of the entire area--era that we're talking about. To name a few, with the risk, I'm sure, of leaving out some, you had Robert Patterson, Lewis Brandon. You had Dr. Simkins. You had Reverend Otis Hairston. Reverend Cecil Bishop was very influential. I indicated earlier I was involved in most of the negotiating sessions. B. J. Battle was very involved. Dr. Laizner. Reverend [John F.] Hatchett, who was an instructor, a professor at Bennett at the time, was involved. Again, I'm sure I'm leaving out some, but I just cannot think of all the people that were involved. Reverend Stanley was involved.

EP: Were there any alternative forms of action that were discussed that were either acted on or not acted upon?

WT: Not really. Again, things, I guess in terms of action, went pretty much according to plan. The basic form of action was through economic withdrawal--another name for boycotting--and/or just through actual physical street demonstrations. Those were the two main types of direct action that we were involved in. Very little litigation went on at that time other than defending those people that were in fact arrested. And we were able to get all of those cases thrown out. But, you know, basically, as I indicated earlier, nothing that was planned that really did not go off, no.

EP: There seemed to be a number of different forms of tactics that were used at, on different evenings. For instance, the newspaper indicates sometimes they were very vocal demonstrations, with right many of the songs that characterized civil rights demonstrations, slogans, hand clapping. At other times, there was the very powerful and very moving silent demonstration on May twenty-third, I believe. And then other times there were marches where there were no attempts to enter the establishments involved. Why were different tactics adopted on different evenings?

WT: Well, again, the tactics were adopted according to the circumstances. And as of right now, I just don't recall what all the circumstances were. Perhaps I can just give you an example. In attempting to feel the pulse, at times you may have felt that a silent demonstration may have been more effective than the singing or more vocal demonstration. It may have depended upon the type of people you had participating. It may have depended upon the type of negotiations that you were in at the time. It--any number of factors would go into making a decision as to, you know, what was needed. It may depend upon the type of emotionalism or the climate that you were attempting to create. You know, it just did not happen. There were these types of factors considered and analyzed before it was decided upon exactly what would occur.

EP: Were these different forms of demonstrations a direct result of the classes that CORE instructed in its field representatives and the executive officers of the different branches?

WT: To a certain extent, yes, and to a certain extent, no. You know, you were taught how to respond to different situations. But again, you were able to adapt to your own particular local situations. And again, I think we were quite fortunate that we were some of the forerunners in that entire thing. So we, in that sense, I guess, you might say we helped to--other people, other communities were able to look at us and learn from the experiences that we had in Greensboro.

EP: Was there much influence on outside previous and contemporary events? By that, I mean the furor created in desegregating Ole Miss [The University of Mississippi] by James Meredith in 1962. And the Birmingham demonstrations more or less paralleled the Greensboro demonstrations, did they not?

WT: I believe so. But as with everything else, you know, no man is an island. And through media, through other forms of communication, I'm sure that all of those things had something to do in creating a climate where what happened in Greensboro could occur. I would venture to say but for those types of things, and other things that preceded it, the

four freshmen never would have had the courage to sit down in the dime store and demand--

[End of Tape 1, Side A--Begin Tape 1, Side B]

EP: You made at least one trip to Washington during the spring and summer of '63, and the newspaper says that the-- whom you met with or, or what decisions were made were not disclosed, although it was known that the Justice Department was speaking to a number of individuals in the civil rights movement, as well as the representatives of chain stores and chain restaurants and hotels in the South at that time. Do you recall any of these meetings?

WT: I remember one meeting with a high-up assistant of the late [Robert] Bobby Kennedy, one of the U. S. attorneys. I don't recall his name. The details of the meeting at this time totally escape me, though.

EP: What was the response of the federal government? Do you think it could have done more in the Greensboro situation at this time?

WT: Yes and no. Again, looking at the climate and what was actually happening in Greensboro, I don't really know, other than using your influence to force these national outfits to go ahead and desegregate their facilities, I really don't know what role they would have played in Greensboro. I think in some of the communities where it was more of a violent atmosphere, they in fact could have played more.

In mentioning local leadership earlier, you, you asked about Mayor Schenck. I had failed to mention that the then governor, Terry Sanford, was quite receptive to--in terms of giving us audience, and showed a very empathetic ear as to what was occurring throughout the state of North Carolina.

EP: Do you think that he showed more consideration for the members of the black community than, say, previous governors had and--

WT: Oh surely. Definitely. And maybe even some that came after him.

EP: Reverend Hairston mentioned to me that in his estimation, Mayor Schenck made very little contribution. That most of the work of compromise and dialogue with city hall was done through Mayor Pro Tem William Trotter. And he mentions one meeting at his church--or one of the other churches, at AME [African Methodist Episcopal] Zion or the Episcopal Church of the Redeemer--where Mayor Pro Tem Trotter came to the church at

two o'clock in the morning, and met with the leaders of the movement and the demonstrations in Greensboro. Do you recall this meeting?

WT: No, I don't. I do remember that the mayor pro tem was quite active and quite receptive. And, as I indicated earlier, Mayor Schenck showed very little leadership in this area, if any at all.

EP: Well, turning to the actual procedure of the demonstrations, do you recall any difficulty in maintaining a nonviolent stance when you were dealing with so many people, literally thousands of people?

WT: No. No.

EP: Do you think there was greater control over the students and the response of the students than with the members of the adult community?

WT: Not really. I, I think what was happening, there again, was really the way that the police in Greensboro responded. In most communities, if you would go back and study and analyze the confrontations that occurred, in most instances I think you would find that the police probably provoked 85 percent of the violent confrontations. This very well could have happened in Greensboro if, in fact, the police had used excessive force or attempted to actually have physically have broken up those demonstrations the way they did in other areas. But this didn't occur, so we really had no reason to become violent.

I would say probably 85 percent of the people did not believe in nonviolence as a theory, as a way of life. But they were disciplined enough to use it as a tactic. But I would dare say that if in fact the police or the citizenry of Greensboro had reacted violently, we would have had pure hell on our hands. I don't think we could have controlled the people. I don't think that we would have stood by and permitted to happen to us what happened to other people in other areas of the South.

EP: Did the students and the adults march together or were they separate demonstrations?

WT: No, we were all intermingled.

EP: All intermingled, even though the student demonstrations occurred first.

WT: That's correct.

EP: In terms of the--I'd like to get a feel for the procedure of a march. It seems to me that frequently there were mass meetings at one of the churches beforehand. And I believe the

paper describes the marches coming up from East Market [Street] and, in effect, parade marshals are along to inform people of where they were going, this, that, and the other. And then they went to their separate assigned targets for that evening. And usually there was a, a mass meeting afterward. Was all this carefully planned beforehand?

WT: Yes, it was. The meeting initially facilitated a place where people could gather. You know, you had to have some central place. There was a meeting--there was a place where instructions could be given as to exactly what tactic would be used that particular evening, exactly what strategies we would be using, where we were going, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera.

The mass meeting afterwards was emotional. It was religious and also strategy. And it afforded us an opportunity to assess where we were and what we had to do, and to make plans for the next day. So each day your activities were, in fact, planned, and with some degree of flexibility to be able to adjust again to the situation once we arrived at our target area.

EP: Was there one central church where these meetings were usually held?

WT: Several churches were used. Church of the Redeemer, you indicated. Providence Baptist Church was used quite a bit. Reverend Bishop's church was used quite a bit; that's the [Trinity] A.M.E. Zion Church. You know, most of the churches within the black community were used. But Providence was centrally located, in that it was in the direct path of going to the downtown area. So for those initial meetings that was used quite a bit.

EP: Were the white crowds all hecklers, or were there some that were just there as observers?

WT: Observers. We didn't have many hecklers. Again, you know, and no ball throwing, no eggs. You had a few remarks made, but I think we were fortunate again that, in that most citizens, in terms of white citizenry, just stayed home.

EP: So you didn't witness any violence on the part of these individuals?

WT: No.

EP: Did you witness any police excesses, or were any reported to you by any of the other marchers?

WT: No.

EP: Was it the plan of CORE to welcome arrests and jam the courts and jails in order to break down the judicial structure?

WT: Yeah. After they started to arrest people, we literally adopted the slogan that we were going to fill up the jails. And again, that was an economic thing, in that it cost the City of Greensboro and the State of North Carolina a considerable amount of money to house these people, and to feed them, and to guard them for no reason. They made the decision that they were going to start arresting people. So we say, if in fact you're going to do it, then spend your money.

It got to the point where the people that were arrested--that was the big demonstration where they had people housed at the armory and at the polio hospital--were literally tricked out of jail because of the, I would say, the economic pressure that was being placed on, on the city of Greensboro. They just couldn't handle it.

EP: You say they were tricked out of jail. Exactly how?

WT: If I remember correctly, negotiations were going on, I believe. And some kind of way, a rumor got started that we--meaning the executive committee--had authorized the people that were down at the polio hospital to leave. And most of the A&T students and adults left, based on that rumor. And the Bennett girls refused to leave until we actually arrived--we meaning myself and a few other people. And we learned afterwards that it was the power structure that started that rumor to actually get to evacuate the people that they had in fact arrested.

EP: I remember the paper saying that the white power structure in Greensboro--by that I mean city council--had worked out a deal with the governor's office and with the administrative offices of A&T and Bennett, such that the A&T students were released into the--in loco parentis--into the custody of the A&T. And the same condition with the Bennett girls. Do you think that this thwarted the plan you just described to fill up the jails, to make it so costly on the city that they would compromise?

WT: At that point, I think that we had basically achieved what we had set out to do. The jails were literally filled. They were overflowing. And I question the fact that a deal was in fact made with either A&T or Bennett. In fact, I can recall Dr. [Willa] Player [president of Bennett College] specifically instructing her girls to do whatever they had to do, whatever their conscience told them to do, regardless of the effect of examinations or anything else. That she understood their plight and their cause. And, you know, as long as they were committed to doing, then they stayed there and acted out their commitments.

I know, for one, she was not a part of any deal. I do not believe that Dr. [Lewis] Dowdy [president of A&T] was a part of any deal. There may have been discussions, but

I don't think any deal was made. I know that I was not a part of, of that. I question the use of that terminology. You may want to interview some of the other parties that may have been involved at that time. But I don't think that that was quite accurate.

EP: This is speculation on the part of the, of the newspaper.

WT: Yeah. I don't even remember that article but--

EP: Dr. Dowdy did come under criticism from some members of the adult black community. Principal--I'm thinking principally of Mr. Ezell Blair, Sr., who said that Dr. Dowdy had told the students that if anyone continued in the demonstration they'd be dismissed, and that exams are going to be held on schedule. Of course, the exams were held on schedule, but no student was dismissed.

WT: I think, again, that statement was taken out of context. I recall that particular incident, but I don't think that those were Dr. Dowdy's words. I think that he probably said that exams would be held on schedule. But again, I don't think that the students were looking to have exams adjourned. We weren't looking for any special treatment. We were committed to a certain cause, and if it meant getting incompletes and taking exams during the summer or the following September, we were prepared to do that.

So, again, you know, even if he for some reason made that statement, which I don't believe he actually did--knowing Dr. Dowdy and working as closely with him as I did--he was playing a different role. His role at the time was to bring in money from North Carolina state to make A&T a first-class institution. He was not a leader of the demonstrations. He was not accountable to the students. He was accountable to the trustees and to the state legislature. So I think it's important to understand the dichotomy of roles that people play in situations like this and not expect everyone to be a Bill Thomas or a Jesse Jackson.

EP: What was the attitude on mass arrests by James Farmer? First of all, did you invite him to come down here to Greensboro?

WT: No. James Farmer was in Greensboro any number of times. He--in fact, most of the time he came, he stayed at my house. James Farmer was a disciple of nonviolent direct action, and the arrest was only one part of it. But he was--he advocated that very strongly.

EP: Could you characterize your discussions, both formal and informal, that you had with him?

WT: Could you put me on hold one second?

EP: Sure.

WT: Go ahead.

EP: That's quite all right. Could you characterize your discussions with Mr. Farmer in context of, in the planning sessions and also privately, at your home, as you've mentioned?

WT: Well, James Farmer, as well as Floyd McKissick, were not only part of the planning, but they were more inspirational. I would say Farmer more so than McKissick, because McKissick was there and he could be contacted in terms of day-to-day activities. But Farmer was there whenever we needed to bring national spotlight to the situation, because the cameras would be rolling whenever the national executive director of CORE would come in. That would bring out people.

He was a very elegant speaker. He participated in demonstrations in Greensboro. He was used more as a figurehead more so than a strategist, you know. He gave us inspiration. He created an emotional climate that brought people out. He brought national attention to the situation in Greensboro. That was his role, as opposed to being a strategist for a particular local community.

EP: So you're saying he did not make any specific input into plans or strategy or, or make suggestions?

WT: No, not really, you know.

EP: What was the role of Mr. McKissick? Was he there as a lawyer or as a civil rights leader?

WT: Floyd was there wearing many hats. At times he was there as an attorney. At times he was there as, again, an inspirational leader. At times he was there as a strategist. Floyd actually lived and ate the civil rights movement for years. That was basically what he did. And when he was practicing law in Durham, he spent more time traveling all over the country participating in these types of things than he did earning a living. So, you know, Floyd wore many hats. Any time he was there, he was there to do whatever he had to do.

EP: Who was responsible for hiring Mr. Clarence Malone as the attorney for all those arrested?

WT: It was the executive committee of CORE, along with, probably, I'm sure, some of the adults throughout the Greensboro area. Okay, I'm going to put you on hold again one second.

EP: Sure.

EP: Yes.

WT: Yes, I'm sorry.

EP: That's quite all right. Do you recall the argument that you had--or that went through the press--with Armistead Sapp, who was the attorney for the S&W and the Mayfair cafeterias? In effect, what he said was that you had said that Greensboro could be another Birmingham in terms of a threat. And you responded by saying, Well, that's false, that what you had said was that members of the community, white and black, would have to work together to prevent another Birmingham. Do you recall that controversy?

WT: Just vaguely. I recall Mr. Sapp being a reactionary type of individual. And, you know, I just don't recall the details of the conversation. But I feel very strongly--I think I could see myself making that type of statement. Because, again, if we had not had the conciliatory type of attitude on both parts, if the powers to be, including the police, had not reacted with extreme caution the way they did, we very well could have had a very explosive situation.

EP: Did you have very many conversations with Mr. Sapp or other representatives of the principally targeted businesses?

WT: Yes. Hold on again, please.

EP: Sure.

[recorder paused]

EP: Did you have many discussions with these individuals?

WT: Only through committees, basically. Not too many individual discussions, but through the committee meetings, in terms of trying to negotiate, to actually bring about the desegregation of those facilities.

EP: Now Mr. Sapp made another allegation, saying that the Justice Department had first asked for the names of people who had chain businesses in the South in Greensboro. And that they sent two people from the Justice Department or the Internal Revenue Service,

and that they were in the O. Henry Hotel, and that once that their cover was exposed, they left. Did, did you hear any of this, these kind of allegations?

WT: I, I doubt very seriously that it happened. Again, you know, I don't recall it specifically, but I'm sure that if they had come, we would have known about it. And, I mean, why would they come undercover? I mean, they wouldn't have to come to Greensboro to get that kind of information. You know what I mean? I'm sure they had dossiers on whatever and whoever they wanted it of. So I think, again, Mr. Sapp is dealing in scare tactics, attempting to show the citizenry of Greensboro that even the federal government was against them. And, I mean, he was reacting more like a Bull Connor than someone from Greensboro.

EP: How many times were you arrested, and what were the conditions like in the place in which you were incarcerated?

WT: Okay. I--if I can recall correctly, I was only incarcerated twice, I believe, and each time I was in the city jail, which was very terrible condition[s]--the smell, the odor, the bunks, et cetera. And, again, I guess the reason why I was not arrested any more, the committee that I was working with felt that I would serve more of a purpose by being outside. In fact, I think at times I probably would have welcomed being arrested; I could have gotten some rest. That way you don't have to be up meeting around the clock and engaging in other types of activities twenty-four hours a day.

EP: Did you ever observe the conditions at the convalescent [polio] hospital?

WT: Yes, I was able to have access basically at will to go in and out. I had that type of arrangement with the police.

EP: How would you describe those conditions?

WT: It was overcrowded. But, again, it was almost jovial. The students, no one abused them. They couldn't get hot baths. And there was really no place where they actually could get hot meals. But they did provide them fruit, milk, juice, sandwiches. And they were not in jail that long. The big thing was it was overcrowded. It wasn't even a jail setting, you know.

ET: So you're saying that whatever negative conditions were as more of a result of the overcrowding than any planned condition by the police?

WT: Yeah. Right. Again, you know, Greensboro was totally different than any other area of the South in terms of how the police reacted. It was just totally different.

EP: You've expressed rather favorable remarks about Captain Jackson. How would you characterize the other two principal law enforcement officers, that is, Sheriff Clayton Jones and Police Chief Paul Calhoun?

WT: Well, I had very little contact with them. Captain Jackson was a field person. I'm sure that the police chief must have had some influence in terms of giving direction, understanding bureaucracy. But Captain Jackson was the person that I dealt with basically, and in terms of the other two, I really know very little about them.

EP: Were conditions as crowded and unpleasant at the National Guard Armory as they were at the polio hospital?

WT: Yes, basically about the same.

EP: About the same. I'm interested in your role as a negotiator in these various committees and sub-committees. Could you--do you remember any specifics of your participation in negotiations with the theatre and restaurant owners?

WT: Not at this time. If I recall correctly, through this committee that the mayor had set up, they all decided that they were, in fact, going to desegregate. And then a time schedule was arrived at, where so many minorities or blacks would enter on certain days, a certain time. And this went on for several days until it was just open for anyone. There was a trial period.

There existed actual fear in the minds of some of the powers to be that the citizenry of Greensboro would in fact react adversely to this. But everyone was proved wrong. That we had--I don't recall any major incidents in any of the facilities, whether or not it was the cafeterias or the hotels or the theatres or anything. But, you know, as to the specifics of the negotiations, I just do not recall at this time.

EP: Most of the principally targeted areas and some thirty or forty other restaurants that were involved in the limelight of the press and the news media desegregated, but Boyd Morris never did. Did CORE then try to follow up and force or bring about the desegregation of the Mayfair Cafeteria?

WT: Yes. Let's see. Did he eventually go out of business?

- EP: Well, as it's been explained to me, he kept insisting, he said, "Now, if the Supreme Court ever says that a private businessman doesn't have the right to select his clientele, then I'll desegregate." Then came the Civil Rights Act. And I guess eventually he did say, "Well, all right, I will desegregate." And the way Dr. Laizner characterizes it, the blacks did not come in large numbers to his establishment, and that the white segregationist supporters who had frequented there then started coming. And then he went out of business.
- WT: Yeah. I, I think eventually he did. I do know that he became a symbol because of the stance that he took. And that we had several demonstrations down at his place. You may have a picture in your files of Jesse and Boyd Morris talking out in front of his cafeteria.
- EP: Yes, I do.
- WT: Yeah. But, you know, it was symbolic. And I'm pretty sure that eventually he did go ahead and desegregate, because if I recall correctly, all public accommodations in Greensboro finally desegregated.
- EP: What was the policy of CORE of patronizing those establishments that did desegregate? For instance, in the first four days, McDonald's announced that it would desegregate. And I believe you were quoted as saying, "Well, we're not going to come down in large numbers," that, "We will wait until this ceases to become an emotional issue, and then we'll come". Is that a fair way to characterize CORE's reaction?
- WT: What we were trying to--again, we weren't looking to create any problems, either economic problems or violent confrontations with anyone. We wanted the right to utilize those facilities. So what I was trying to say was to the powers to be, hey, let this thing occur naturally and gradually. That you were not going to have three or four thousand black people standing in line, trying to get a hamburger. We're used to eating hamburgers. That once you open your doors and we know that we have the right, then we will patronize that the same way we would any other place, that it wouldn't be an onslaught of people just going there for the sake of going. And that was basically what I was trying to say there.
- EP: Now the Greensboro Chamber of Commerce and the Greensboro Merchants Association announced that they had passed resolutions advocating desegregation of all public facilities. And I think they went to the extent of putting this resolution in the paper in the form of a full-page ad.
- WT: That's correct.

EP: But nobody responded to this. The businesses said, Well, you know, they don't speak for us. And CORE--you made a point of saying as executive officer of CORE that you had not been contacted by these individuals. What was CORE's reaction to these resolutions?

WT: Well, our reaction was that we always welcomed any support that we could get, but it had no teeth. It had no enforcement. It could not command anyone to do anything. The resolution was all well and good. But the point that they were making, or trying to make, with the resolution was, okay, we made this resolution, now call off your dogs. We said we're not going to stop demonstration until they actually desegregate. The resolution [doesn't] mean a damn thing until we can actually achieve what we're after. It shows some good faith, but the places are still segregated. So that, that was the point that I was making there.

EP: Were the arrests as formal and nonviolent as they've been described in the paper? For instance, sometimes they have almost a comic effect. Not taking away from the seriousness of the situation, but there was one episode where Captain Jackson asked if they would be willing to walk the block and a half to the police station. And the demonstrators said no, they'd rather ride. And so the buses and other police vehicles and so forth were called up. And at another time, that the students waited very orderly, in an orderly manner at the curbside until the buses came. And they climbed on very, very willingly and then sang as they drove off. And the paper says--in an editorial--said the demonstration had almost the formality of a Japanese dance. Would you agree with this assessment or not?

WT: I couldn't agree with anything like that. I think it showed the lack of sensitivity on the part of the, the writers of the newspaper. What was actually occurring there was that people were serious. Sure, they were angry, but again, it was the nature that they understood what was happening. And if, in fact, people had been going around just so uptight the way they were in other parts of the country, you would have had a violent situation on your hands.

I think what was going on was an emotional outlet on the part of the people that were involved. The singing did not necessarily indicate joy. But it was an emotional outlet. And sometimes there were smiles. Sometime it was a funny situation because it--they were able to look at just how silly that whole thing was as far as arresting a person for attempting to exercise his or her right, you know.

In many ways, the powers to be made fools out of themselves. And I think that's how many of the people that were demonstrating looked at it. See, we have been able to force these people to just make jackasses out of themselves.

And in some instances it was funny, in a way. But it was sad in another way. And that was the reaction, I think, of many people. But I mean it, it was not a joyous occasion overall, no. Certain incidents were funny. People laughed. They reacted to it.

EP: There seemed to be a great deal of coordination between the different waves of students going to the different targets. As a matter of fact, in one instance the paper said that four A&T students requested admittance to the Center Theatre, and when they were denied, almost within seconds, a wave of students came around the corner and then proceeded to surround the ticket office. And then at the same time, one wave broke off and went to the Mayfair, another wave stopped at the S&W, and a fourth wave went off to the Carolina [Theatre]. Were they this well executed and well-planned?

WT: Oh, yes. That, that did not happen by accident.

EP: In other words, they didn't just move from target to target as--

WT: No, we knew exactly where we were going. That--the initial students went up just to test, and once they were denied, you know--I mean, it wasn't just a coincidence that we had people in the downtown area just waiting to go. No, that was planned.

EP: Were there prearranged signals as to when to leave the edge of the curb and surround the ticket office? And was it determined that a certain number would try to seek admittance and refuse to move, and thereby be arrested?

WT: Well, the entire thing was planned. But, again, someone could be just watching. And once there is refused admission, then the marshals would give the commands as to what would take place next. And all of this, again, was prearranged.

EP: We've discussed the different forms of tactics that were used. Do you think one was more effective than another?

WT: No, not particularly. I think they all were useful, again, depending upon the circumstances.

EP: Were the instructions that were given to the individual students carefully rehearsed and carefully gone over? I know that the CORE leaders, as you have said, had instruction from the national office. And I've read various sources that said that there were classes in how to maintain nonviolent discipline. Do you think the students were carefully instructed in, as to how to behave and how to react?

- WT: I think so. I think if it hadn't been for that, then we probably would have had more problems than we had. The marshals, specifically, we spent a lot of time with in terms of crowd control and how to actually engage in nonviolent direct action. So a considerable amount of time was spent doing that.
- EP: I've talked with one of the fire marshals at the S&W and one of the police officers who went along--were in that special committee formed or group formed by Captain Jackson. And he said that sometimes it seemed that almost there was a signal to send a certain number of people, as I've said, around the ticket office of the theatres. And there's one instance in particular when fifty-eight students actually went into the Carolina Theatre and sat down, and were arrested for trespass. Was there anything of that--we've talked about they were carefully planned, but were there such signals on the scene?
- WT: Well, again, before we left the church, we knew exactly what we were going to do. And we knew that once those students were denied admission, that we were going to either all of us go in and just actually sit down a block, knowing that we would be arrested, or just whatever. It did not just happen. It was actually planned.
- EP: Was there much input from civil rights leaders in other surrounding towns? I know that, for instance, Dr. Charles Lyons of Raleigh, who was a Shaw [University] professor and involved with the teacher movement, teacher movement for desegregation at schools in Raleigh, spoke--
- WT: I guess Floyd McKissick probably had more input in terms of surroundings than anyone else. And that was because of his role with both the NAACP and CORE.
- EP: One thing that keeps recurring in my mind is the fact that these overlapping committees-- I know that there were at least three major committees before the final formation of the-- there was the Evans Committee, and then there was the permanent Human Relations Committee under W. O. Conrad. And this is the one that I mentioned last time when you were quoted--you and Reverend Stanley--quoted as, as being very outspoken in the meetings, and saying, "Now, we've got to get moving on this. And, sure, we want a spirit of cooperation, but we want some positive actions and not just words." Do you think that this committee was really striving for that? Or do you think that they were trying to accommodate as much as they could to the reality of the situation, but from the businessman's point of view?
- WT: Well, I think a bit of both. I think that basically the orientation was from the business community point of view. But I also think that they were in tune enough to realize that some achievements had to be made. But the problem, again, with these types of

committees was that they had no teeth. They had no enforcement power. They could only use persuasion and moral suasion. And I don't really think that at that particular time they were really prepared to use any real amount of persuasion. I mean, what could they do to a Boyd Morris? They were not prepared to call for a boycott by the citizens of Greensboro. So really they were powerless.

And that whole thing of setting up commissions was really a conciliatory thing on the part of everyone in attempting to create a climate where change could occur. I think that happened. But at that particular time, we were not just in tune to listening to more talk and more promises. We wanted action, and we wanted it then. There was a sense of urgency that was there. And we tried to communicate this to the people that made up these committees.

EP: Well, given the fact that they were powerless and that this was, in effect, a window dressing to provide a climate, do you think that much of substance was accomplished by moral suasion and conciliatory gestures?

WT: There was--see, I think it's very difficult to isolate what they were able to, or we were able to accomplish in that setting without looking at what had occurred prior thereto and what was occurring simultaneously with that. Without the demonstrations, the Human Relations Committee would not have been able to do anything. I think the demonstrations set a climate wherein it made it possible for the other things to happen the same way I indicated that things that were happening through the [James] Meredith situation other parts of the country. It created a climate for the four freshmen. I think that we, through the demonstrations, created a climate where people were a bit more willing to sit down and talk, because they knew that if they didn't then they were going to be confronted again with that type of situation, and they didn't want that.

EP: This committee that continued releasing statements through that fall and through the spring of '64, I'm very interested in the way that they seemed to try to give a more positive view of what was being accomplished than actually was. By that, I mean, for instance, they gave out the number of seats desegregated in restaurants [laughs], rather than the number of restaurants. And the number of rooms in hotels that were desegregated. Now, do you think that this is true, that they were inflating these numbers instead of saying thirty-five or twenty-five restaurants have agreed to desegregate? Instead, they gave this astronomical figure of fourteen hundred seats.

WT: Oh, sure. I mean, again, that's, I'm sure you're aware of what was happening just the same that I am. And it was again this building a Potemkin village. They were attempting to create something that didn't really exist. Could you hold one second please?

EP: Surely.

[pause]

WT: Yes.

EP: In that connection, Conrad gave periodic statements or speeches to various business and civic groups. And what he kept saying was, he kept emphasizing an economic point of view, vocational training. He seemed to be ignoring the importance of civil rights to the black community. Or it may be that he was just being pragmatic and practical and saying that, well, the important thing is to change the economic situation.

But it seemed to me, by advocating students in the high schools, black students being enrolled in more vocational training, and return to restructuring curriculum in schools, this seemed possibly to be trying to put the blame on the black community and turning the ball back to the--or burden back to the black community and the still predominantly black schools. Do you think this was the case, or am I misreading his intent?

WT: Well, I think that was part of the case. But I think that the other part is just the whole paternalistic attitude that many of the powers to be had. And it really sort of disheartened me to constantly hear this thing about vocational training, vocational training, vocational training. You know, they didn't train these little white girls to be able to sell hot dogs across the lunch counter or to ring a cash register. No vocational training was needed. The only thing you needed was someone with average intelligence, you know.

I think, again, we were trying to build up a straw man in order to have something to knock down. This has been the history throughout. Either you don't have qualifications or you're overly qualified. I've actually had people to say, "Well, hey, you're overly qualified. We don't want you."

We're building straw men. We're trying constantly to find reasons for not doing what we know should be done. This is the greatest country on earth, and we're qualified to get anything that we want done. Industry constantly trains and retrain. So we don't have to continue to build straw men if we are committed to doing things. The difference was we didn't have that real commitment--at least the timetable that we wanted them to have.

EP: It appears to me that the demonstrations in Greensboro took a dramatic turn in the sit-downs led by Jesse Jackson on Greene Street on the evening of June fifth, and then--for which he was arrested the next morning--and then, the sit-downs on the square June sixth. Was this a planned change in tactics? It seems quite a dramatic change.

WT: Yes, it was, because at that particular time the demonstrations were beginning to be the same old thing. The whole emotional climate had reached its low ebb and we needed a lift.

I can recall the incidents of that, you know, very clearly. And that's really what created a name for Jesse, and we actually created that whole scene. Once Jesse was arrested, within twenty-four hours we had at least ten thousand leaflets on the street proclaiming Jesse as a great leader. The leaflets basically read that your great leader had been arrested, and we called for a mass demonstration that particular night.

On my way up to the Church of the Redeemer where we held our offices, I never will forget I ran into Captain Jackson on East Market Street. I was walking up, and he asked me, he said--he called me Willie--he said, "Willie," he said, "Have you seen that Jackson fellow--Jackson boy?" I don't know his exact words. I said, "Well, not since last night, Captain. What can I do for you?" He said, "We have a warrant for his arrest." I said, "For what?" And I believe he said, "Disturbing the peace."

EP: Inciting to riot.

WT: So I said, "As a result of his actions the night before?" Now, mind you, no riot had occurred. The only thing that happened was Jesse led the group in prayer. And Captain Jackson got on his bullhorn and told us to disperse. And Jesse said, "Not until we have our prayer." And he told everybody to kneel. And they did kneel. And he prayed. He prayed for the Captain and everybody else. And afterwards, everyone rose. They got back in a line, two by two, and we marched back to the church.

So I told Captain Jackson, I said, "Well, Captain, I haven't seen him since last night. But I'll tell you what I'll do. As soon as I see him, I will call you and let you know where you can pick him up."

Well, in the interim, we got our leaflets out. We had Jesse to come to the church. We had photographers, the newspaper and cameramen there. And we forced the police to literally pick him up and drag him from the altar. And this is what--

EP: Oh, really?

WT: Yes, we did.

EP: The impression I got from the paper was that Captain Jackson waited outside and that Jackson, Jesse Jackson, then came outside, and they walked away to the police car.

WT: If my memory--again, this has been a long time--serves me right, I thought that they actually went in. Now they may have waited, or maybe that had been what we had planned and they just waited, waited, waited. And then we just changed and said, "Hey,

let him go on out.” But I do know he was at the church, and we called them, and that’s where he was arrested.

EP: Well, wasn’t it potentially dangerous for him, in that at that time inciting to riot was considered a felony, and had he been convicted he might have been sentenced--

WT: No, that was my least worry. There was no riot. That was, that was a joke--

[End of Tape 1, Side B--Begin Tape 2, Side A]

EP: --on the police force trying to coerce and stop the demonstrations by giving such a stiff charge to the apparent leader of the demonstration?

WT: Yes. I do. In fact, I think that that was probably the most repressive act that they did. And they played right into our hands, because, but for that, it’s quite possible that the demonstrations could have fizzled out. But by doing that, we were able to project Jesse as, you know, this great leader. And it seems to me--wasn’t this around Easter, when this happened?

EP: This was June fifth.

WT: I don’t know whether that was around Easter or not. But Jesse wrote a letter from a Greensboro jail based similar to Martin Luther King’s letter from a Birmingham jail. And this letter we, we passed it out throughout the Greensboro area. And this was read in churches on that particular Sunday. And it was quite dramatic, and it really caused the citizenry of Greensboro to respond. And it brought people out again. So--

EP: Do you mean primarily black, or black and white?

WT: Primarily black. There were a few whites that participated, but primarily black. And they, they really played into our hands with that particular move. The other interesting thing about that is I was standing right next to Jesse. And it was myself that asked Jesse to lead us in prayer after Captain Jackson had requested, or ordered, us to move. Well, the difference was that I was a Greensboro boy. They considered Jesse an outsider. That’s why he was arrested and not myself.

EP: Wanted to punish the outsider.

WT: Beg your pardon?

EP: So they wanted to punish the outsider?

WT: They wanted to punish the outsider.

EP: Well, you know the whole concept of “outside agitators” was a favorite phrase by Southern city officials and police officials. And you think they were picking up on this?

WT: I, I really do. I think that they felt because Jesse was conspicuous, that by eliminating him, by locking him up, then that would cause the demonstrations to fizzle.

EP: Now on the second, on the next night, there was even a larger number of--there were, there was an even larger number of individuals that sat down on the square.

WT: That’s true.

EP: And the paper uses phrases like “mob,” “volatile,” “potential riot situation,” “large number of them were--a police line was formed around them--a large number of them were arrested.” The police officials that I’ve talked to subsequently and the way the newspaper characterized it at the time, it seemed like they were all set that here is an explosion just about to happen. Do you think that was a more dangerous situation than the previous evening, or do you think that this was blown out of proportion, too?

WT: I think it all was blown out of proportion. I, you know, I guess for Greensboro it was probably more potentially dangerous than any situation it’d been confronted with. But again, the police were smart in not using an excessive amount of force. No one was billy clubbed. No one was beaten. No one was thrown into the vans or the buses. They asked us to move, and people got on the buses. That was the difference. I mean, it was no mob. Those people knew what they were doing. They knew that they were going to sit in that square until they were arrested. You had not only students, but you had adults. You had everybody from professional people down to common laborers that were involved in this.

So it wasn’t a mob situation. It wasn’t a riot. The newspapers played it up to sensationalism to sell newspapers. But again, that helped us. By doing that, it brought more people out the next night, till it finally snowballed.

EP: One of the more successful tactics in defending those actually arrested by Mr. Malone was that he asked everyone to name him as the attorney of record. What was the reason for this tactic?

WT: I’m not sure if that was a tactic or not. What had happened was that we basically took over control of the litigation, and that we were prepared to try all those cases and just tie

up the whole judicial system. And we had to. And, I mean, for economic reasons and for other reasons, these people could not go out and afford to hire their own attorney. So we did it. And Mr. Malone was prepared to represent all of us.

EP: Did the students who were released from the places of incarceration, did they return to the streets as demonstrators?

WT: Oh, sure.

EP: Why was there such a positive response to Mayor Schenck's largely noncommittal statement on June eighth that in effect ended the demonstrations? I believe Reverend {Richard L.] Hicks at one point was going to resign his position--not, not as minister [at Church of the Redeemer] but as a position--

WT: Human Relations [Committee].

EP: Right, yes. And Jesse Jackson, who had said he wasn't going to pay bail, did put up bond. The mayor made a big thing about reading it in a news conference, and then he also met with a number of black leaders of the demonstration at the Hayes-Taylor YMCA. Why was there this positive response to a rather noncommittal statement?

WT: You know, I don't even remember what the statement was. Can you sort of refresh my recollection?

EP: Basically, it said that he and the city council would work toward supporting--well, this was when the permanent Human Relations Committee was established, as of this announcement--and that the council was going to empower them to work to achieve a solution, that they weren't going to pass any resolutions requiring integration, of course. But Reverend Hairston and Dr. Laizner said, well, it wasn't so much that, it was the behind the scenes things that had already been--

WT: I can almost assure you some deal was made somewhere along the line. I just don't remember what. But I'm sure that we had some commitment somewhere. And we felt strong enough to know that the way we turned them off, we could turn them back on.

EP: What sort of activities was CORE involved in after 1963? I know that Dr. Laizner said that they were involved in voter registration drives, community improvement--

WT: Right. Voter registration. They were very active in voter registration and education drives. They were probably involved in a lot of the employment. Now, I left Greensboro

at the end of my junior year. I'm trying to see if that was seventy--I mean '63 or '64. See, I finished in '66. That was '65--I think I left Greensboro at the end of '63. So I was not really involved after that.

EP: Well, Dr. Laizner made mention of the fact that--she said that your brother then became president of CORE.

WT: That's correct.

EP: And she said that--I'm not really sure what it was-- but she said that they were--she and several others--were unaware that Mr. Patterson was going to be nominated. And that--although she didn't specifically say that--the implication was that this misunderstanding created a sort of split or power struggle in there as to who would become the next chairman of CORE.

WT: I don't know anything about that. That is the first time I've heard of that.

EP: What became of the CORE chapter in Greensboro? It seems to have more or less just kind of died away.

WT: It probably did. It had served its usefulness at that particular point. Again, it was made up of basically young people. And it was there for a particular purpose. It responded to a particular need at the time, which is basically an organization that believed in the tactic of nonviolent direct action. It sort of merged, as opposed to dissipating, into other ongoing organizations in Greensboro--Greensboro Citizens Association, the NAACP was still there. There were other committees that these people actually and actively functioned on. And their goals and their activities were particularly the same, and there was really no need at that particular time. And it served its usefulness.

EP: Well, it seemed to me that nationally, there was still quite a lot of activities going on that CORE and similar groups were involved in.

WT: But not in Greensboro, though. That's the key. See, Greensboro was sort of unique in that way, again, because while we had national ties, we were not that nationally involved.

EP: What do you think became of CORE nationally?

WT: Well, I don't know. After Farmer left, I just think--and then McKissick was elected and then he left--I think it had some real bad leadership problems. And I think in addition to that, that similar to what happened in Greensboro probably happened nationwide. It, it

sort of outlived its usefulness. It did not have the capacity or the ability to change along with the demands of society at that particular time. You know, the NAACP has been able to do that; it's a perpetual. The black power movement started. It tried to adapt that. Other things occurred, and they got into financial difficulties, and they just couldn't respond to the needs of the people.

EP: It seems in several of the histories that have been written about the civil rights movement, that there was a split in CORE between those who still advocated the nonviolent tactics that--and was, in part, responsible for Mr. Farmer leaving--and those who, in light of subsequent events, were not that militant but seemed so at the time. The spreading of the garbage, and sitting down on the bridge in New York, and similar incidents in San Francisco were cited as examples of a shift to more militancy in CORE, and as several of these writers have said, contributed to a fatal split in the movement. Would you--

WT: Well, they're more enlightened than I am. I'm really not qualified to speak on that, I don't think.

EP: Did you end your association with CORE and the civil rights movement when you left Greensboro, or did you continue civil rights activities?

WT: As far as CORE was concerned, yes. But I've been involved on committees, et cetera, wherever I've gone. I've been involved with the NAACP in Newburg, New York. I'm on the Board of the Urban League here in Union County, Elizabeth, [New Jersey], where I practice law. And whatever contribution I can make through my law practice, yes. But I've never had the desire to be a major professional civil righter, you know. I think I make my contributions as a citizen that is aware of the problems of my people, but not on a full-time basis.

EP: Do you think--what became of the civil rights movement itself in the sixties?

WT: Again, I think that what happened was that people look at the civil rights movement as a perpetual, ongoing thing. It is to a certain extent. But it does not maintain the same level of intensity, of emotionalism, of sensationalism that it did during the demonstrations. In many ways, you still have a movement going. But it takes on different shapes and different forms.

Once these concrete goals were achieved--the desegregation of the public accommodations, began to hire a few salespeople--well, the emotionalism was gone. That didn't mean that you didn't stop working to totally desegregate your work forces. You became involved politically. You became involved in trying to get the Civil Rights Act passed, the Voting Rights Act passed, you know. All that's still part of it.

Other things were happening throughout the country that black people were involved in, you know. But, I think that because you don't read about black people constantly marching, picketing, demonstrating, that doesn't mean that, hey, people are not out there working to try to correct a wrong situation.

EP: Do you think it suffered from the factionalism involved, and--those who were opposed to militancy and those who were for more violent confrontation, a la Black Panthers and similar such groups, armed groups?

WT: Again, I'm not really concerned with it. I think that that occurs with anything. The same way it happened with the Vietnam demonstrations or anything else. I don't think that that--first of all, by responding to your question, if I attempted to do so, I would have to assume that there was a demise in the civil rights movement. I'm not prepared to accept that premise. I don't think that it was a demise. I think that it changed, it merged into other things.

Again, that was part of what was occurring. And that occurred out of frustration on the part of people who said, "Well, hey, the nonviolent things did not accomplish what we thought. It's not occurring at the rate that it should," et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. But, by that time, the mass demonstrations had in fact subsided anyway. They were not occurring then.

EP: So you're saying that the militancy had no effect on, on the subsiding of the--

WT: [Unclear-both parties speaking simultaneously]

EP: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Thomas.

WT: Okay.

[End of Interview]