

PRESERVING OUR HISTORY: ROTARY CLUB OF GREENSBORO
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

INTERVIEWEE: WILLIAM A. LAMBERT

INTERVIEWER: HERMANN TROJANOWSKI

DATE: November 28, 2007

[Begin Tape 1, Side A]

HT: – November 28, 2007 and my name is Hermann Trojanowski and I am at Friends Home West interviewing Mr. William A. Lambert for the Preserving Our History: Rotary Club of Greensboro oral history project. Mr. Lambert, thank you so much for being here today. If you give me your full name we can test and see how we both sound on the recording.

WL: Good. William Alan, spelled A-l-a-n, last name L-a-m-b-e-r-t, Lambert. William Alan Lambert.

[Recorder turned off, then back on]

HT: Mr. Lambert, will you please tell me when and where you were born.

WL: I was born in Greensboro, North Carolina at St. Leo's Hospital on Summit Avenue, August 31, 1926, at 12:08 [a.m.] in the morning [Both laugh].

HT: Could you tell me something about your family and growing up here in Greensboro?

WL: Well my father's name is John Lambert, no middle initial, and I found that very unusual and I asked him why and he said, it was very interesting, most of the boys born in 1898 and 1899 had no middle name. And he gave me innumerable – a cousin of his, Talmelge Shields; Doak Finch, who's CEO of Thomasville Furniture Industries; my dad, John Lambert. My Mother was Amanda PerMar. She was a – her family was French Huguenots who came to Greensboro in 1757, in the Guilford College area. My dad – she would kid him about the fact that he was a newcomer, but the Lamberts came up here from Randolph County in 1896. So we were – as far as she was concerned, the Lamberts were newcomers to Greensboro.

My grandfather was in the foundry business and my father was in the woodworking machinery business. He worked for Wysong & Miles Company and was Sales Manager of Newman Machinery Company until the Great Depression

when he went to work as Southern Sales Manager for the Yates American Machinery Company; office Beloit, Wise.

I was brought home to 103 South Tremont Drive from the hospital. My father had just completed that home. It's on the first block of South Tremont off of West Market Street. I lived my first nine years of my life there. I was an only child. I had a privileged childhood in that we had full-time domestic help, we had a fellow who came every morning, his name was Bruce, and stoked the furnace and on rainy days drove me to school. I walked the rest of the time to Lindley Elementary [School]. I had a happy childhood.

One very well-known event that I remember very well was about the third or fourth grade, Miss Florence Pannil, who was the Principal at Lindley Elementary, I was sent to her office and she gave me a paddling with a ping pong paddle. And when I got home, my mother met me at the door with a ping pong paddle and I said, "But Mom, Miss Pannil has already paddled me." She said, "I haven't paddled you." So I got a paddling from her. At 5:30 when my father walked home he said, "Amanda [Lambert], where is the board of education?" She produced the ping pong paddle and I said, "Daddy, I got paddled by Miss Pannil at school and I got paddled by Mom." And he said, "You haven't been paddled by me yet." So I got my third paddling of the day.

HT: What had you done?

WL: I ran my mouth. [Both laugh] Interrupted the teacher. And so, I was educable. That was the only and last paddling I got at school. No more paddling. But I had a happy childhood. I really did. One of my dearest friends was Jack Vohnger. He was Jack Vohnger, Jr. He lived at the corner of Tremont and West Market. He was in George Petty's squadron as a fighter pilot. Was killed shortly after George Petty was killed, but we had been friends all the way through high school.

I finished Lindley Elementary and went on to – oh, one interesting – do you want to know all this trivia?

HT: Yes!

WL: OK.

HT: It's always fascinating.

WL: One interesting thing happened when I was about five years old. The steps to the basement on Tremont Drive went down to a landing at the bottom. There was a drain in the landing and my five year old, six year old curiosity got the best of me and I took the lid off the drain and when I couldn't reach down in it, I decided to stick my foot down there, but when I did, my foot went down so far, and it opened out underneath and my foot, instead of going straight down, returned to an L-

shape and caught. I couldn't get it back out. Well, my grandfather PerMar, who was my mother's father, he was a civil engineer and had to contract the grating and building West Market as a boulevard and mother sent Bruce after him, and here came Granddaddy with about twenty workers with pneumatic drills and mules and pans and you name it, pick axes, coming to get Willie out of the drain. And my grandfather saw the situation and said to my mother, "Amanda, do you have an old fashioned poker that you poke the fire with that has a hook on it?" She said, "Certainly." He said, "Go get it." So she brought it to him and he eased it down in the drain and caught my shoelace, broke the shoelace, and then took my foot out of the shoe and released me from the drain. So they didn't have to dig up any cement or anything or run the risk of injury [laughs].

HT: And did you get a paddling that time?

WL: I did get a paddling that time. [Both laugh] One other time when I should have gotten a paddling – a little boy next door was H. L. Cranford and H. L. had a brand new sailor coat. You've seen them, a little blue coat with the stripes on the shoulder and I was green with envy. So I decided, with the help of my friend Billy Carr across the street, that we would change H. L.'s coloring configuration completely. And we had a big bucket of green paint and we painted him green from head to foot. That was not taken to well. [Both laugh]

HT: It wasn't St. Patrick's Day was it?

WL: It should have been. [Both laugh] I guess I had a very normal childhood. We had the usual pets; dogs and rabbits and that type of thing.

HT: Right. But how did the [Great] Depression affect you and your family life?

WL: The Depression really and truly did not affect me at all. It affected members of my daddy's family and members of my mother's family greatly. And as my dad laughed and said years later, that he had been very fortunate throughout the Great Depression and that it had kept up four families including his own. And – but he let me know under no uncertain terms that that was not charity, that was family.

HT: Did your mother work outside the home?

WL: No. My mother never – my dad used to tell my mom, "If you – I'll make the living, you make the living worthwhile," which is the same bargain I made with my wife. She had – well she was a volunteer. She was tremendous in volunteer work. In fact, she had a Head Start program here in Greensboro before there was a Head Start, at First Presbyterian Church. And when President Bush came five years ago, she was asked to greet President Bush at the airport because of her volunteerism, not because of her political affiliations. And he referred to her, in his speech at High Point College, as having given fifty years as a volunteer.

HT: That's wonderful.

WL: Not because of any law, but because of the goodness of her heart. And she in her generosity, said, "Well, it was largely because my husband made it possible for me to volunteer." But it's kind of been a standing joke in our family, "I'll make the living, you make the living worthwhile."

HT: That's a wonderful proverb. [Both laugh] What were your favorite subjects in high school? I know you attended Grimsley.

WL: Yes, Greensboro Senior High School. My favorite subjects were English, Miss Sarah Mims. I thoroughly enjoyed Latin and French. As a matter of fact, I probably am sitting talking to you today because of my foreign language in school; looking back at it. Because I enlisted in the army when I finished – well, I finished a year at Guilford [College]. In those days they only had eleven grades. So I finished and went one year as a freshman to Guilford College and then enlisted in the Army and they sent me to infantry basic training at Camp Croft, South Carolina. And it was a little earlier that this, it was in early November before Thanksgiving, it was cold. I'll never forget that day. It was a cold, messy, rainy day and I was sitting at the edge of a foxhole that I had dug. They were going to run a tank over us the next day as part of our training so they said, "Be sure your fox hole is deep enough that you don't get crushed." [Laughs] And they came and called my name and sent me back to camp. And the next morning when I went into the day room, the Captain said, "Lambert, you have two choices – one of two choices to make. Number one, you can go to OCS [Officer Candidate School] at Fort Benning [Georgia] and become a second Lieutenant in the infantry or you can go to Japanese Interpreter School at the University of Minnesota." And my reply was, "Captain, that is a no-brainer." I said, "You can get me killed in six weeks, but you can't possibly teach me Japanese in six weeks." So I said, "I'll elect to go to Japanese Interpreter School," which I did. And when I finished there they sent me overseas and I was overseas for eighteen months and then came home on rotation and finished at the University of North Carolina [Chapel Hill].

HT: So you became proficient in speaking Japanese?

WL: At the time, I was fairly fluent.

HT: That's amazing.

WL: But, if you don't use it, you lose it.

HT: That's true. Now going back –

WL: [Phrase in Japanese] You don't speak Japanese.

HT: Ich kan Deutsch sprechen.

WL: Ich spreche ein Deutsch.

HT: I had Sarah Mims as well.

WL: OK. Let me tell you an interesting – you’ll get a bang out of this one. I was chairman for our twenty-fifth reunion for our class of ’43, and we of course invite all our teachers you know. Well, Miss Sarah Mims came and I knew she was coming so I got a long stemmed red rose and when I called on her she came – I asked her to come up front and I held her hand, presented her the red rose and I quoted,

“When that April with his showres soote
The droughte of March hath perced to the roote,
And bathed every veine in swich licour,
Of which vertu engendred is the flowr;
Whan Zephyrus eek with his sweete breeth
Inspired hath in every holt and heeth
The tendre croppes, and the yonge sonne
Hath in the Ram his halve cours yronne,
[And smale fowles maken melodye
That sleepen al the night with open ye—
So priketh hem Nature in hir corages—
Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages,—]
And palmeres for to seeken straunge strondes
Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimage—”

And tears ran down her cheeks and she said, “Bill Lambert, of all my students in my entire history, I never would have dreamed that you would have remembered.” [Laughs]

HT: I had forgotten – she had probably taught me that as well, but I had forgotten where that passage is from.

WL: First eighteen lines of Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* in Old English.

HT: I thought it was Chaucer. Oh gosh.

WL: In Elizabethan. She taught it to us in Elizabethan English but first it brought a tremendous laugh you know, but back to the Japanese. I really thought that there were two things that – because out of my platoon that I trained with at Camp Croft, fifty – one of us were lost after the Battle of the Bulge as replacements and I would have been one of those fifty – sixty-two men if it had not been for the fact that I had some language aptitude. And Miss Amelia Stevenson, I wrote her a letter when I was overseas and thanked her for her having put up with me in Latin and that and the atomic bomb are the reason I’m here because I am convinced as a student of history that – well of course, no Pearl Harbor, no Hiroshima or

Nagasaki, that's kind of a no brainer, but we would have lost, in my opinion, a million men invading – And that brings up – in talking with a Japanese colonel one day, I asked him why they had not invaded our west coast. It was wide open. He said, "We knew it was wide open." I said, "Why didn't you invade?" He said, "Because we knew that your populace was armed – that your populace had rifles, pistols, and shotguns in their homes and we didn't think we could deal with that from a guerilla warfare standpoint." And I thought that was a fascinating analysis. I don't know if it would be of any use today but I thought it was interesting, and he was probably parroting the Japanese high command's analysis that the reason was because of the armed citizenry.

HT: What did you study after you came back from the war?

WL: Business Administration.

HT: Business Administration?

WL: Yes. Commerce. Commerce – commerce in the School of Business at Chapel Hill. Played football at Chapel Hill, '46 to '49. Met my wife while shining a pair of shoes. A girl across the street came over one afternoon in 1947, in summer of '47, and said, "Beefy, you've got to clean my shoes. I've got a date with Herbert [Carson]" whom she later married. And I said, "OK." And she started back across the street and I said, "Reedie [Graham], what do I get out of this?" And she said, "A date with a cute blonde this fall." And I didn't think anything more about it. Well we were playing – it was October 25, we were playing State [North Carolina State University] in Raleigh and after the game my dad came down to the field house and said, "Why aren't you getting dressed?" And I said, "What do you mean Dad?" And he said, "You've got a date at Woman's College tonight." Well in those days we had no interstate. You went through Cary and Hillsborough and Efland and Sedalia and Haw River and Graham and you name it to get to Greensboro and it took two, two and a half hours. Well, I was thirty minutes late getting to Mary Foust Dorm and Jane said that she had really thought at one time she would just not come down. Anybody showing up thirty minutes late but she did and we've known each other sixty years on November 25 of this year. We've been married fifty-eight years.

HT: That is amazing. I guess you're a keeper then. [Laughs]

WL: I guess she'd given up. [Laughs]

HT: Did you enjoy your time at UNC-Chapel Hill?

WL: Oh yeah. I enjoyed school. Always. I was Chairman of the Judicial Board at Chapel Hill and as I said, played football and president of my dorm, but having had three alma maters; Guilford College, University of Minnesota, and University of North Carolina, I'm not a dyed in the wool Tar Heel necessarily.

HT: Now you went to University of Minnesota for Japanese language only.

WL: Japanese.

HT: You didn't get your degree there.

WL: No, no. No, no. No sir.

HT: Well what influence do you think having been in the military has had on your life in the long term?

WL: Well, it taught me that when you've gone as far as you can go and you cannot possibly go any further, physically, emotionally, or mentally, you can. That's one – one thing it taught me. Number two, there are three kinds of people in the world; those that you can ask and who will do anything in the world they can for you, those that you tell emphatically, and then those whom you use a string of epitaphs [expletives] for about a half hour to get their attention and then once you've got their attention, they will respond.

HT: Right.

WL: It also taught me that there has to be a chain of command and that there has to be a boss. There are innumerable jokes about committees; the proverbial camel and horse that were put together by a committee. The committee or the unable appointed by the unwilling to do the unnecessary. But the buck has to always stop somewhere and someone has to take charge and make a decision, right or wrong, and you have to go with that. It taught me an appreciation of how little you can get by with, because in the Army, they tell you "It's time to go," and you've got thirty minutes to get it all in the barracks bag and you're gone; your little steel helmet, your rifle or your side arm, and your duffle bag and you're ready to move.

I had a corporal come to me one day, and I never will forget that. He said, "Sergeant, will you come with me I want to show you something." And I said, "Sure." And he took me out to an Army garbage dump and there were little children three, four, and five year old in Army garbage up to their elbows getting something to eat and it made an indelible impression on my mind. I'll never forget it. I solemnly promised myself at that moment that I would never complain about food as long I knew it was clean and my wife will tell you that she's never heard me complain about food. She has complained about her own cooking. [Laughs] And she's looked at me and she's said, "Sweetheart," she's said, "Are you going to eat that?" And I said, "Yes ma'am." I said, "It's fine." Because I knew it was fine.

HT: Where did you see this?

WL: In Puerto Rico.

HT: In Puerto Rico.

WL: I think that that is a lesson that you never forget. A lot of things in the military, I mean I just thought were ridiculous. We won't go into those. No point than hammering on the military, they get enough grief as it is, but there was someone writing who said, "Thank God there are a lot of old time Master Sergeants to keep the rest of us straight." I think that it is an invaluable experience. I really think that for a lot of people, it's kind of like our son said, he went to the Citadel [Charleston, South Carolina] and he said that he gets real tickled when he hears people say that they can't find themselves. He said, "They really ought to go to the Citadel and take the first four weeks of being a "Nob" as a freshman when you find out exactly who you are; you're not anybody." [Laughs] And they convince you of that right quick and then they start molding you back. But I think that as individuals we need to find out that we are not as important that we seem to think we are and this thing of pandering to people annoys me greatly.

HT: After you graduated, what kind of work did you decide to go into?

WL: Well, I was all set to go into the furniture business. I had two job offers in the furniture industry and one in the insurance business and my mother, sitting at one day, one Sunday at lunch she said, "Well, have you decided on where you're going to work?" And I said, "Almost." And she said, "Why don't you go to work with your dad in the machinery business?" I said, "Because he didn't ask me." And my dad said, "Amanda, would you ask our son if Mr. Finch asked him to come to work for him at Thomasville or did he go apply for a job?" And I kind of laughed and mother said, she turned to my dad, she was a mediator and she said, "Well how much would you pay him?" And he said, "Three hundred dollars a month and an automobile." And she said, "Did you hear that?" And I said "Yes ma'am; tell him he just hired a salesman." [Both laugh] Because I had been offered two hundred and fifty dollars a month at Thomasville and so I asked my dad later, years later, why we had never discussed it. He said, "Well I wanted you to have two bona fide job offers because," he said, "at some time in life's way I knew that someone would say, "He had to go to work for his daddy." And he said, "You would hear it and you can kind of chuckle to yourself because you would know that you didn't."

HT: That's right. Could you tell me a little bit about the business?

WL: We sold woodworking machinery for making furniture. For instance, if you wanted to make 3,000 of those chairs a day we could do it, we could set up – completely equip the plant and outlay it and have it ready for you to go.

HT: And where was this machinery manufactured?

WL: All over the United States. We were manufacturer's representatives. Now my grandfather had been in the foundry business and he had supplied the furniture industry but from an entirely different viewpoint. He had supplied the castings to Wysong & Miles and the Newman Machinery Company, and Dependable Machinery Company. Our firm was Norment, N-o-r-m-e-n-t & Lambert, Inc. and our main office is still in Lenoir, North Carolina, and our son is President, CEO, now and I made the same stipulations when he came with the company. You have to have two bona fide job offers before I'll talk with you. He had three or four. As he said, he had one he was a commissioned Lieutenant – Second Lieutenant in the Air Force. I said, "We'll count that as one." [Both laugh] He's been with the company now, at least he took it over, thirty years.

HT: Well, how did it happen that you lived in Greensboro, but the plant was up in Lenoir?

WL: Oh gosh, that's a long story. Mr. J. A., who was President of Wysong & Miles, had employed my dad when he was an eighteen year old boy, fresh out of school, in those days high school. And Mr. Norment had worked for Wysong & Miles. And then the Depression came along and my dad had left Wysong to go to greener pastures, he thought, and they were and they were very good to him. And Mr. Kleemeier was – had a gentleman's agreement with another large firm here in Greensboro who owned a lot stock in Jefferson and that if they ever wanted to sell he offered to buy and if he wanted to sell his, he would offer it to them. Well, Mr. Russell Hall who was a stock broker here during the Depression, numbers of families came to him whose employees had Wysong stock and he discovered that Wysong had a tremendous book value and he started buying their stock. And then he discovered that if bought this block of stock from this company, that he would control the company. He did nothing illegal, immoral, or unethical at all. I don't mean to imply that. But suddenly, Mr. Kleemeier discovered that he was no longer President of the company. So, he called my dad and said, "I can get the lines, the M. Root Company [?]; James L. Taylor; G. M. Deal Machine Works [?]; Mash, Bell, and Chowner [?], and just on and on and on. If you and Vic will go into business with me, and we'll form a sales organization." And they did. And it was imminently successful. Of course, it came along at an ideal time, in a way. But, it was a lot of fun.

My dad died when I was thirty-six years of age and he and Mr. Doak Finch, I mentioned earlier was a friend of his, and Mr. Doak took me under his wing as my mentor and anytime I had a problem, I took it to Mr. Doak. And he had a lot of unique sayings. One time I took a letter from a competitor that I had received who, he was, the competitor was sore as a pup. And Mr. Doak read the letter and he looked at me and said, "Bill Lambert, is this true?" and I said, "Yes sir." And he said, "Well just remember one thing," he said, "you can never out squirt a skunk, so just forget it." [Both laugh]

But Mr. Doak, he always called me on Christmas Eve to wish me a Merry Christmas. And he would track me down if I was at the Greensboro Country Club or wherever on New Year's Eve at a party, he'd always track me down to wish me a Happy New Year. And his being my mentor was invaluable to me.

HT: Well, you were at the company how many years Mr. Lambert?

WT: Forty-three.

HT: Forty-three. How did you see business change over those forty-three years?

WL: We went from doing things the hard way to automated equipment and it was real interesting. You think when you automate equipment that you eliminate manpower. It's real interesting, but it was my observation that no one ever lost a job due to automation, because of the increased production, they were needed somewhere else. Now, it meant you did not hire additional people to get the increased production, but you didn't fire anybody. A lot of people think that automation means you lose your job. I never saw that. Since I – I laughingly told a fellow that we hired – oh, it's been thirty-five, forty years ago now. I hired him away from some oil company. He had moved down here from Philadelphia and his dad was a district manager of some oil company and he didn't want to go back North; he wanted to stay in the South. I said, "Why don't you come to work for us?" He said, "I don't know anything about machinery." I said, "I'll teach you." And I told him at the time, I said, "Now understand, you and I are going to ride this thing right out the back door because when we are old enough to retire, the woodworking machinery business, eighty percent of the wood furniture was manufactured within one hundred and fifty miles of where you are seated. Wood furniture was manufactured in the United States. Now it is about twenty percent. I thought it would go down to Louisiana, Mississippi, and Arkansas where we would bring in exotic woods from South America. That did not happen at all. It moved to China, and Taiwan, and Singapore and Malaysia and the – my son has had to completely reinvent the company. And now he's calling on people who are doing metal working, people who are doing glass, plastics; the wood working machinery business, as far as he's concerned, is twenty percent of his total sales, it used to be ninety percent of our sales.

HT: Does he call on overseas customers at all?

WL: No. No.

HT: Just domestic.

WL: Virginia, North and South Carolina. And then – but the company has gone on a rebuilding program; it's gone national and we're on the website and, you know, but I had no idea that we would abandon these plants that we abandoned in Virginia and North and South Carolina.

HT: When did all this happen? In the last –

WL: In the last fifteen years.

HT: In the last fifteen years.

WL: Yeah. Yep. And it went boom.

HT: And the same thing has happened with the textile industry.

WL: Exactly. Textile and furniture are a thing of the past as far as we're concerned. And I think it's all part of the strategy of global economy. I don't think it was just a – it wasn't just a catch as catch can thing that happened, it was done with very meticulously and very planned I think. And I don't – I'm not wise enough or erudite enough to know whether that was good, bad, or indifferent. I have an opinion, but that doesn't matter.

HT: Would you recall any significant events that happened during your forty-three years with the company?

WL: Significant events? Oh, yes! Again, I am not sitting in judgment on these things; I'll just relay them to you as I see them. One thing, we had absolutely no excuse for spewing the debris into the air that we were spewing for years. I remember housewives would hang their washing on the line going into Martinsville and there were certain days that they could not hang it on the line on Monday mornings because of all the ash, and soot, and dust in the air from furniture and textile plants. By the same token, we went from that extreme to the extreme that the air in a furniture factory was purer than the air that you and I are breathing right now; a tremendous amount of expense in doing that. It didn't need to be that pure. But, the expense involved there and environmental concerns. Finishing material was dramatically changed, employee compensation for lost time, accidents and resulting insurance costs skyrocketing for workers who might sue. As a matter of fact, when I was President of the company, I will very proudly say that our company in sixty-five years of today's existence never sued and was never sued. So we made a quality product, we stood behind our product. We did what we said we would do. Because I don't believe any other – I won't say I believe, I know that no other one of our competitors could say that. But I know that these costs involved had a tremendous impact on sending our manufacturing overseas. The importation of foreign machinery – I don't think that people realize that today, but if you wanted to purchase a domestic piece of metalworking equipment like – well the list of manufacturing which were preeminent, and I didn't sell metalworking, so I have no grief in this, but companies like Lodge and Shipley, Stewart Warner, Warner Swasey, Pratt Whitney, these were all the Cadillac quality machinery, metalworking, are gone. You can't even purchase one manufactured in the United States. They're over. They're all manufactured off

shore. There are a few highly automated machines that can be adapted for metal working. As a matter of fact, our son has one now, Common Machinery Company in Minnesota, but we watched company after company after company of woodworking machinery liquidate. They don't even exist anymore. We had twenty-six of the top manufacturing, wood working and machinery, manufacturers in the United States and there are only three of them left. The other twenty-three have gone. There are metalist industries that produced woodworking machinery and also produced all of the football uniforms and football helmets; they're gone.

HT: When did all this take place?

WL: During the last fifteen years.

HT: During the last fifteen years.

WL: Amazing. Since 1991. Let's say since 1990; seventeen years. And it's astonishing to see something change that dramatically and that quickly. And again, I'm not sitting in judgment; I'm just reporting what happened. I know that we lost a tremendous amount of jobs in North Carolina as a result. We took a real hit on it, economically, I think.

Oh, one interesting – they're interesting things though that I think without, "Hey, look at me everybody." One thing that I did that I left out of my childhood; when I was about ten years old, I rode the last trolley car that ran in Greensboro. It came down Lee Street. My granddaddy lived across from McIver School and in those days, Lee Street was a nice upper middle class neighborhood of homes. There was no manufacturing to speak of on the street, and the manufacturing was there, the owners lived on the street, like Wysong & Miles. My grandfather owned half of Cook-Lewis Foundry that sat at the corner Jackson Street and West Lee, but we were on the front porch and the trolley car was coming and it was Sunday afternoon, no Saturday afternoon, and my grandfather said, "Billy, here's a token, run and catch the streetcar, because it's the last one that will ever run." And I ran down there and waved him down and as I got on, to show you how small Greensboro was, he said, "Billy Lambert, where do you think you're going?" This was a conductor on the streetcar. And I said, "My granddaddy said for me to come and get on this streetcar because it was the last one that would ever run in Greensboro." And he and daddy were sitting up there on the porch. And the conductor waved at my granddaddy and my granddaddy and dad waved back, so he knew that it was all right. And away we went. And sure enough, when we got the car barn, which was downtown, there was my father and granddaddy waiting for me and so I remember that vividly.

I remember vividly going out to the airport to see the first airmail plane come in and I remember vividly my first airplane ride. My Uncle Charles [Lambert] held North Carolina Pilot's License Number twenty-eight. In those

days, there was no FAA, and the individual pilot was licensed with the state and he and Ed McClain, who was in charge of maintenance and everything at old Lindley Field, they bought a surplus bi-plane from the Army Air Force and reconstructed it and that was the first time that I ever went up in an airplane. And we flew along the railroad and Charles. [Recorder turned off]

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

WL: – to find a fairground that was having a fair in the fall, and they would fly in and land in the infield at the quarter mile track that most of them had and they would take people to ride. And the young lady [tape stops, tape restarts] – but she was a wing walker and she had on a parachute and when she got into the plane it was a contrived situation. She didn't have on the parachute, it was in the plane, and then Charles would take her off and they would fly around and they would come down low over the crowd and she would wave at them and then they would go up and they would say that she was going to wing walk and she would put on a parachute and she would get up on the wing and she would be standing on the wing and then for some unknown reason, Charles would flip it and she would fall off and free fall for several hundred feet and people would scream and then she would pull the rip cord. Well, she became a ferry plane pilot during the Second World War and killed in England and – on takeoff. And she is buried in the Quaker Cemetery right here on the corner and I'm trying to remember her name, because I flew with her.

Oh, another thing that I do want to get in the minutes. My grandfather, as I said, owned several foundries. One here – two here in Greensboro and one in Winston and about 1932 or '33 he bought a gondola car load of Civil War surplus cannon balls. He thought they were solid shot and he had the fellow who was charging the furnace – Granddaddy always supervised how much scrap iron and how much new pig iron, which is virgin iron, would go into a charge based on the grain that he wanted in the casting. A lot of people don't know that iron has a grain just like wood and whether it is molten [iron] or malleable iron, or what kind of iron you're doing, and he threw about four or five of those cannon balls in and didn't know they were loaded with black powder and they blew the furnace to smithereens. Granddaddy said they were lucky that they didn't kill anybody and of course, molten iron went everywhere but with that, this was at the old Cook-Lewis Foundry Company that's right across the street from the old Wysong & Miles office building which is still standing and he had them dig along side of the Southern Railroad, dig a trench, and he buried that whole gondola car of cannon balls there. To my knowledge, they're there today and the reason I wanted it in the information, I've told this story many times, but it's never been recorded and I figured someday somebody is going to dig up those cannon balls.

HT: I hope they don't blow the place up.

WL: And they ought to – they're still live, probably, and there is a whole gondola car load of them buried in the Southern Railroad right of way. To my knowledge, they have never been disturbed.

HT: And does the Railroad know about this?

WL: No. And it was never talked about again and so when they dig them up, they ought to know that they were not left there by General Joseph Johnson's troops when the surrendered, that they came along about 1932 in a load of scrap iron.

Another interesting thing he did, he bought, oh it must have been two dozen bronze cannons that were left over from the Civil War and it suddenly dawned on him that bronze does not yield to a hammer and he wondered how in the world he was going to get them into the furnace and he decided that he would try the law of physics. It was the coldest winter on record so he filled the touch hole with an iron file and broke it off, in several of them, then filled them up with water and drove wedges in the muzzle and stood them upright and they froze solid and that cracked them into pieces so he could throw them in the furnace. But I thought that was an interesting sideline.

One other thing that was interesting in the family, I mentioned that my grandfather, my mother's father, two interesting things happened to him. One, mother said when she was about twelve or thirteen years old, she and her sister came home from the old Pomona High School and – which is now an apartment building. It was Lindley Junior High School when I went there. And there were two gentlemen seated in cutaway coats and red sashes and everything in the living room trying to talk my grandfather into going back to Lourdes, France, to assume his title as the Duke of Lourdes and he thought it was hilariously funny and had no intention of going back to France, period, and told them to please have a notarized paper drawn up relinquishing any claim and he'd be happy to sign it.

And the other thing was, my grandfather PerMar, who was a civil engineer, he had the contract for digging the basement of the Jefferson Building and they were almost agreed and they called him on the phone out at our house out on Tremont Drive, and said, "We're almost agreed but we've hit this tremendous rock." They said, "It's almost the size of an A Model Ford coop." He said, "Should we blast?" He said, "Heavens no, don't blast." "Well, what will we do with it?" He said, "Dig a whole beside it, and bury it." So sure enough, they dug a hole in the bottom of the Jefferson Building, rolled that rock into the hole and covered it up. [Both laugh]

HT: And it's still there.

WL: It's still there. [Both laugh] Years later, his grandson – I decided at age seventy-eight to go back in business so I took the family farm at Stokesdale and I'm making a subdivision out of it and they ran into a bunch of rock, Doggett

Construction, and they said – they called me and said, “What are we going to do with all this rock? Do you want us to haul it off or what?” And I told them, I said, “Well right over there in the corner,” I said, “you see that empty space?” And they said, “Yes.” I said, “I suggest you dig a hole about fifteen feet wide and fifteen feet deep and one hundred and fifty feet long and bury it.” Which they did. So it saved us a lot of money for hauling costs and it wasn’t my quick mind that did it, but I remember what my granddaddy had done. [Both laugh]

Incidentally, my children thought that I had lost my mind when I said I was going to become a land developer. They said, “Daddy, you know nothing about that.” I said, “That’s right.” And they said, “You’re doing exactly what old man granddaddy did.” I said, “What?” They said, “Don’t you remember when you were coming out of Security National Bank and old man Granddaddy was stopped by – and asked what he was going to do now that he was retired and he said he was going back into business and he was seventy-five? And you said you thought he had lost his mind?” And I said, “I am, aren’t I? I’m doing exactly what he did.” Because he went back into the foundry business. But I said, “At least it was something he knew something about.”

Interesting about that man though, he came out of Security National Bank one morning and – years ago, this was 1914 or something and Mr. W. C. Boren stopped him and said, “Bascomb, I just subscribed – put your name down as an original stockholder and subscriber of Carolina Steel and Iron.” And my grandfather said, “You what? What is that?” He said, “It’s going to be a new steel fabricator in town.” So he held on to that stock through thick and thin and after he died he left it to the family and his \$500.00 investment, would you like to shoot a guess as to how much it was worth?

HT: \$100,000.00

WL: Over \$700,000.00

HT: Oh my gosh! [Both laugh]

WL: Over a friend stopping and going out of the bank. Good huh? By the way, did Charlie Weill tell you the story about the Cone family and the bank?

HT: He mentioned several banks. The progression of bank ownership in Greensboro which eventually became, you know – and how Charlotte eventually became the hub of the banking business.

WL: Well did he tell you about the Cone family and their having chartered a bank at Proximity at about 1912?

HT: No.

WL: In 1928, they sold the bank, all their stock, to Security National Bank. In 1929, Security National Bank went under in the Big Depression. The bank crashed. Banks were closed. The Cone family went to Security National Bank, got the name of every depositor who had been depositors when they owned the bank. The amount of money that was on deposit under those people's names and paid off every one of them in full. I know that to be a fact because two of my uncles would have been wiped out if it had not been for the Cone family.

HT: That was very generous of them to do that.

WL: Oh my heavens!

HT: Almost unheard of I would assume.

WL: Would you expect that to happen today?

HT: No.

WL: To me it was one of the most generous – it was beyond being ethical. It was being ethical to the ninth degree. The Cone family said, "These people deposited this money because of us. When we got out, they stayed, but we didn't tell them to get out." I guess. I guess that was their thinking. But I thought that was one of the most – it was just another thing that the Cone family has done for the county that people don't realize. A letter to that effect, was from one of the depositors to Mr. Herman Cone, Sr., and it's in the museum at Greensboro – the Greensboro Historic Museum and it's from Mr. H. C. Barnes to Mr. Herman Cone. Now that is not Herman, Jr., or Bigsy, that's Herman, Sr.

HT: Let's see. You didn't move to Greensboro; you've been here all your life. Have you ever been involved with the political arena of Greensboro?

WL: Not directly.

HT: Not directly. Right. How about civic arena, volunteer work and that sort of thing, other than the Rotary Club?

WL: Well, let's see. OK. I've been very active in the Presbyterian Church.

HT: That's First Presbyterian.

WL: Well, First Presbyterian and the Men's Bible Class, singing in the Men's Bible Class. I led the singing for fifteen years. I sang in the men's – in the choir there. I taught Sunday school. I was Superintendent, my wife and I, were Superintendents. We were President of the Young Couples' Class. When the Presbytery asked that I help move Westminster Presbyterian Church from down on Asheboro Street, I went down there one cold, wet, rainy January night and

talked them into – they only had eighty-eight members, and talked them into coming out on Friendly Road and stayed with them and then went back to First Presbyterian and then came back to Westminster. And they now have almost two thousand members. So that was a move I was very much a part of. And Chairman of the Building Committee. I was Chairman of the Building Committee for the Boys Scout Office Building for the one that they just tore down and put in a new one over here on Wendover.

HT: Westover and Wendover. Yes.

WL: And if it hadn't have been for Fred – for Stout, Fred Stout and Ben Smith, Jr., that piece of property would never have been able to have been put together. They were both licensed surveyors and land planners and spent their time, effort, and energy getting all that together because a lot of that land had been owned by people who had worked for Starmount Company and – and the Scales family and the last deed of that property was a deed for one square foot, as a matter of fact. But, I was General Chairman for that building and I was very proud of that building. I was a docent at the Greensboro Historic Museum for over fifteen years, taking – after I retired, taking children through the museum and I had a travel trunk that I took around to the various schools on soldiers of the Revolutionary War, the Civil War, and the Second World War. And I was in charge of – Chairman of the Rotary Club for the District Rotary on literacy and then was Chairman of the local Rotary Clubs tutorial program for three schools here in town, getting the tutors and tutoring. And then I was involved – my daughter – our daughter involved me with – [item drops]

HT: Go ahead and talk –

WL: I'll get it. Thank you. Our daughter involved me when I first retired; she volunteered me to tutor at Lincoln Middle School; which I thoroughly enjoyed. I had several interesting things happen there, I thought, they were interesting to me. One morning I went down to tutor this young man, I went every Wednesday morning for two hours, was to help him in anything that he was having difficulty in and when I went down one morning, I said, "Reggie, what would you like to study today?" He said, "I don't want to do nothing." I said, "Oh, OK, that suits me. That's fine." And I picked up a newspaper and I started reading the newspaper. And after a few minutes he said, "Mr. Lambert?" I said, "Yes." He said, "You just don't care, do you." I said, "Don't care?" I said, "What do you think I got up at 5:30 this morning and I'm retired and it's spitting rain out there and come down here to try to help you and you say I don't care?" I said, "I'll give you a clue what I don't care about." I said, "I don't care about people who won't try." I said, "They irritate me up one side and down the other." And I said, "I'm not used to running with losers." I said, "When I was at Chapel Hill playing football, we went to the Sugar Bowl." I said, "We didn't – I don't mess around with losers; I don't want to be associated with them." I said, "Don't you ever accuse me of not caring." And I started reading the paper again. In a couple of

minutes he said, “Mr. Lambert?” And I said, “Yes sir?” He said, “I think I’m ready to study.” [Both laugh]

HT: This was a fellow named Reggie?

WL: Yeah.

HT: How old was Reggie?

WL: How old was he?

HT: Yes.

WL: Then? He was about thirteen.

HT: Thirteen.

WL: The long story goes that he graduated – graduated, played football and graduated, finished college and he is now a successful business man. He also happens to be black, but that’s immaterial. I thought it was a very interesting story. And it was interesting what motivated him. I didn’t argue with him, I didn’t cajole him, I just laid it on the line, and we went from there; and it worked. But what works for one person won’t work for the next. I know that.

HT: Right. With which volunteer. Let’s see how to phrase this. What type of volunteer work have you enjoyed the most?

WL: Oh, I enjoyed it all. I mean, I wouldn’t qualify it that way at all because I enjoyed all of it. I guess I’m a ham, really. And speaking of that, I have enjoyed ham radio. That’s been a lot of fun. I’ve had some interesting experiences there. I know I was listening one morning – one Saturday morning and there was a mayday and I went back to the mayday and it was a fellow with his wife and two children on board the yacht *Johanna* off of New Zealand. And he said that they were on fire and sinking and could I get him help? I said “We’ll do the best we can.” And I said – I said, “Don’t you dare leave that radio unless you tie the key down so that we have a continuous signal on you so we can get a fix.” And I had a friend who was a retired Coast Guard commander who was up at Yanceyville [North Carolina]. So I called him and told him what the problem was and he asked me about the yacht and where was it registered out of. And I went back to the fellow and he said it was registered out of Denmark: Copenhagen, Denmark. And I told my friend, who was a retired Coast Guard commander, and he immediately got on the telephone and called the Coast Guard, I guess in San Diego, [California] and they radioed New Zealand. New Zealand dispatched a sea plane with rescue equipment on board and they dropped two frogmen and pumps and subsequently put the fire out and sailed the boat back into New Zealand. And I received a thank you from the man later.

Another time I was sitting, listening, there was a young lady, or rather a man who I discovered was a minister down in Peru and he was trying to talk to a fellow in Mexico to get a hospital plane to come and pick up his daughter. He thought that she had appendicitis and they were out in the woods – you know, out in the jungle. And so I relayed for them and it turned out OK. And we got through to them and they sent a plane. Weeks later I got a picture of this young lady, she looked like she was about twelve years old, sitting up in a hospital bed grinning and underneath it said, “Thank you Mr. Lambert.” So that was a real treat.

Let me think. Hey Janie! [Recorder off, then back on]

WL: What else do you want to know?

HT: Well, let’s see. Can you relate any stories about prominent people you’ve known in Greensboro?

WL: Oh, let’s see. Some prominent people I’ve known. You want the good, bad, and indifferent? [Both laugh]

HT: Whatever you want to tell for the tape, or for the interview.

WL: OK, I think that one of the most interesting and one of the nicest people I knew was Mr. Herman Cone, Sr., and I knew him through his two sons, Alan – Alan and I roomed together at Chapel Hill and Alan and I’ve been friends ever since and we try to have lunch once a month together. And Herman, Jr., we call “Bigsy,” he nick-named himself Bigsy when Alan was born because he was two years older and people would say, “Who are you?” And he’d say he was Bigsy because he was bigger; the bigger of the two. But Mr. Herman was – I had the privilege of going a couple of times with him to Blowing Rock [North Carolina]. They had a home at Blowing Rock and I was privileged to be a houseguest there, before my marital days and –

HT: Is this the Cone Mansion that is now the park?

WL: No, that was – that was his – that was his aunt. His daddy’s – Mr. Herman’s daddy’s brother’s home. That was the Moses Cone, they were the Caesar Cone.

HT: Right.

WL: Now Caesar Cone will throw you because Mr. Caesar Cone was Granny’s husband. We called her Granny because she preferred to be called Granny. She was Mrs. Janette Cone, and I had the privilege of spending a couple of – several weeks – a couple of summers up at Lake Placid at her home. She was an interesting individual, and a charming lady. And she, as you are probably aware, gave the money for the Hayes Taylor YMCA on East Market Street, named after

her butler Andrew Taylor, and her maid and cook – her head cook whose name was, I think, Bertha Hayes, but I'm not sure of that. I'm not sure of the first name. Alan is going to call you, or going to call, what's her name, who's coordinating it, Sandy Neerman.

HT: Sandy Neerman.

WL: Yes. Bobby asked me to recruit some folks so I've recruited Alan Cone. Alan said he would after he got back from Florida. And Seth Macon has already called, and I recruited Seth, and Alan, and Tom Cochran. Now Seth was not born in Greensboro, but he has been here over seventy years.

HT: He'll do. [Both laugh]

WL: And he's a Rotarian. And Tom has been here seventy years, Tom Cochran so he wasn't born here but they've both been here a long time. Mr. Herman was a very down to earth gentleman in every respect and a tremendous set of values. Mr. Kleemeier, as I said, was President of Wysong & Miles. I saw one of the most fascinating things for me at that time and as I look back on it, things that happened, in front of the Mayfair Cafeteria one day. Mr. Kleemeier, I met – I came from Chapel Hill and met my mom and dad at the Mayfair for supper, and the Mayfair Cafeteria was on – at the corner of what is now West – East Friendly and North Elm. It was run by Boyd Morris who was the mayor of Greensboro and he ran – owned that cafeteria. Of course I knew him through my dad. But after supper, Mr. Kleemeier handed my dad a check, and I couldn't help but notice it was for thirty thousand dollars and this was in 1946, '47. Thirty thousand dollars was a lot of money. It would be fifteen times that today with inflation. It would be four hundred and fifty thousand dollars today, easy. And my dad said, "John Kleemeier, you don't owe me that," and handed it back to Mr. Kleemeier. Mr. Kleemeier said, "I do owe you that. I know what I owe you," and put it in Daddy's pocket. And my dad said, "If Vic doesn't owe me, you don't owe me." And took the check out and tore it up. Well, I was dumb – dumbfounded, but I suddenly realized years later that I had been in the presence of two men of total integrity; that money didn't matter. It was a matter of ethics. It was a matter of principle and each was standing on his principle; and that impressed me. And I wonder, at my age now I wonder if we still have that in this country.

HT: Did you find out what the money was all about?

WL: It was a matter of settling up and – but I thought it was an interesting situation.

I knew a lot of influential and important people at First Presbyterian Church. I mean Mr. W. Y. Preyer. I counted the ballots the morning that Mr. W. Y. Preyer was elected elder; ruling elder at First Presbyterian Church. He got every vote that was cast but one. And the only thing that I could figure out was that he didn't vote for himself.[Both laugh] A year later his son was elected, Rich

Preyer [L. Richardson Preyer] and Rich got every vote but two. And the only way I could rationalize that in my mind was, "Well, he must not have voted for himself and his daddy may not have voted for him or something. I mean, you know, I mean because never before, and I counted the votes down there many a year for officers, church officers. Those were the only two men that ever came, that ever even approached that; getting every vote but two. They were people to be admired and who were role models and who never disappointed me.

HT: That's truly amazing. So how's Greensboro changed since the time since you've lived here?

WL: Oh gosh, when I was born here, there weren't but twenty five thousand people. There's two hundred and fifty thousand people now. I think that's about what we have; give or take a few. And it's changed in that, use to, I walked down the length of Elm Street and I knew someone in every store. As a matter of fact, a boy, as a fifteen year old boy, I worked for Mr. D. C. Wright at Wright's Clothing Company having worked at Belk's Department Store. Now there's an interesting story for you. I worked at Belk's on Saturdays in high school and that Christmas, Mr. Coble [Joe Coble, Howard Coble's father] who was the manager of the men's department told me on Christmas Eve night that I should pick a tie – pick out a tie for my Christmas present. So I went over and we had three sets of ties. We had a fifty-five cent necktie and a dollar and a half neck tie, and then two dollars and a half neck tie. Two dollars and a half was a lot to pay for a neck tie in those days. You might buy a five dollar tie at Younts Deboe. But, I picked out the dollar and a half tie. I didn't pick out the most expensive and I wasn't going to wear a fifty-five cent neck tie, I knew that. And I took it over to the desk and Mr. Coble said, "Where did you get that tie?" And I said, "Off the dollar and a half rack." And he said, "Well, we meant for you to get it off the fifty-five cent tie rack." And I said, "Mr. Coble, there is no point in me taking that fifty-five cent tie because I wouldn't wear it anyway." I said, "I appreciate it, but I don't need the tie." I went in Monday morning and turned in my resignation because I just didn't want to work for an outfit that gave away fifty-five cent neck ties which cost them about thirty-five cents. And that was my Christmas present.

And I walked down the street and went into Wright's Clothing Company and asked Mr. Wright if I could work for him on Saturdays selling men's clothing. And he said, "Do you have any experience?" I said, "Up at the corner at Belk's" And he said, "Well, why are you – did you get fired?" And I said, "No sir. I quit." And he said, "You did?" I said, "Yes sir." And he said, "You didn't have a job?" And I said, "No sir." I said, "I do have a job though," I said, "I carry your paper every morning, I live at 3920 Starmount Drive and you live on West Market Street." And I said, "I carry your morning paper every morning." And he said, "Why you're John Lambert's boy." And I said, "Yes sir." He said, "You've got a job." He said, "Start Saturday." And I said, "Thank you sir." And he said, "You're not going to ask how much you're going to make?" And I said, "No sir, I figured that you'll pay me what I'm worth." Well, I'd been making two dollars

and a half a Saturday and then I had to take my lunch out of that and when I went in the following Monday afternoon to get my pay, to pick up my pay from school, I opened up and there was twenty-seven dollars. And I was completely taken aback. And I said, "Mr. Wright, are you sure this is correct?" He said, "Is that not fair?" And I said, "Mr. Wright, that's more than fair." It was ten times what I had made in the other job. To make a long story short, from then on, all the way through college, 'til I [laughs] – til I took permanent employment with Norment and Lambert, anytime I wanted a job in the summer, or whatever, I would walk in and Mr. Wright would laugh and say, "Your sales book is under the counter." [Both laugh] And we never bickered over price, we never argued what he was going to pay me, he always was very fair in his payment.

HT: You must have been a good salesman too.

WL: Well – but he was always very – but I learned a lot from Mr. D. C. Wright. But I went back – I look back then and I just wonder if we have the – if we have the integrity, the ethic that we – that that generation had. And perhaps some of my generation had. And I'm not sure it's there. And I miss that. I think that's a change for the worse.

HT: For the whole country.

WL: For the whole country. The thing that I find disturbing to me as an eighty-one year old person – I think of those fifty-one men in my platoon, and the reason I know that, a nurse called me on the telephone when I was at the University of Minnesota and said that three of my buddies were over at Fort Snelling General Hospital [St. Paul, Minnesota] that I had trained with and who'd like to see me. And so I went over to see them and they explained to me that our platoon had been completely decimated. There were eleven of us left. And I really had the feeling – I don't know if you ever saw *Saving Private Ryan* or not, but he was standing by graves there in France and he turned to his wife, this was years after the War was over, and he says, "Tell me I was worth saving." And as I look at some of the things – gangs in Greensboro that are sprouting up and this individual who shot five – has been accused of shooting five people in the head execution style over the period of the last several months. And I see things like that, and I see things like people being accosted in the shopping center and on university campuses and I wonder, "We asked those fellows to die for that? To save that? And that's what we asked them to do? Give me a break." It just doesn't seem fair. And I wonder how you reach those people and tell them, "Tell me that you are worth saving because your conduct doesn't prove that to me." My dad told me, you know how every fifteen year old boy knows everything? I mean, I did, and maybe you were smarter than I was.

HT: Unfortunately not.

WL: My dad, I was about fifteen, I never will forget it. One afternoon I said something smart alecky and he said, "Wait a minute," he said. "You and I need to get some things straight." He said, "Through no fault of your own, you sir are a consumer. You produce absolutely nothing. It's not your fault, it's your age." But he said, "You take in perfectly good food and exude waste. You take in perfectly good water and exude waste. You take in perfectly good air and turn out carbon dioxide." He said, "To my knowledge, you are a consumer." He said, "Don't get a psychological hang-up over it. That's where you are." But he said, "Your job is to get an education so that you can be a contributing member of this society. A law abiding, contributing member and not be a consumer." He said, "Your job when I say something to you is to say 'Yes sir,' or 'No sir,' or 'Thank you sir.' When your mother says something or you teachers or your coach." He said, "Do we understand each other?" I don't think we tell people this anymore.

HT: Probably not; which is unfortunate.

WL: And I think maybe we should be telling some of these fourteen, fifteen, sixteen, seventeen year olds, "You're a consumer. You're producing nothing. It's not your fault. We don't want you to get a psychological hang-up over it. It's where you are, but wake up. Wise up."

Another thing that I want you to explain to me. It seems that when it comes to technological progress, communication progress, a kid, if I bought him a new iPod or whatever the latest technological gimmick is, they'd be tickled to death. Would not ask any questions about it. Just take it and they'd know how to use it more than I would. In a heartbeat. We are perfectly willing to take transportation. We don't reinvent the airplane every generation. We don't reinvent the automobile every generation. We take what we have and build on it. Housing. We don't hand somebody an axe, go out and start over again. We build on it. You can't name but one area where we will flatly refuse to do that generation after generation. And that is interpersonal relationships. That's how I will treat you and you will treat me and the things that I've learned that I know work like you're a fool to ever take the first drink of liquor. I've never talked to a ninety year old man who's said it had helped him. You're a fool to try the first marijuana or dope or whatever. You're a prize fool to do it. Take my word for it. You won't take my word for it, as the younger generation. And especially when it comes to how we will treat each other. Why? My generation was just as guilty. We took it in every other area except personal behavior and interpersonal relationships we would not listen. And I had a lot of friends who paid for it dearly. Drank themselves to death. Drank themselves into oblivion. How come? Why do we reserve that one little spot, yet everything else—. There looks like there would be a simple answer to that. Doesn't it?

HT: It must be the human nature.

WL: OK. Well, that's one thing at eighty-one years of age I'd like answered and I would think you are a seat of learning over there at UNCG you guys ought to come up with an answer for that. My generation couldn't. Maybe yours can.

I see things that I find amazing – [recorder stops]

[End of Tape 1, Side B] [Beginning of Tape 2, Side A]

WL: Discrimination is wrong. I know, I came through – See, I never attended school with a black person. Ever. Been with Japanese, Nisei, Chinese, but never an African-American. Never played football against one or with one. That's wrong. That's not even debatable. Yet I find today we will not discriminate against people because of race, color, national origin, religion; but we reserve one area that we discriminate the hell out of and nobody – [recorder stops, recorder starts again] We will discriminate against people on the bases on economics. How? By income tax laws. It's perfectly all right to charge somebody thirty-eight percent and someone else fifteen percent. Why? Why is that not discrimination? And I believe it is, but if discrimination is wrong in principle, as a principle, then it's wrong. Don't start reserving certain areas. I just received a letter – two letters – one to Jane [Lambert] and one to me Saturday from the Social Security Department saying they were raising our Social Security two point three percent to compensate for the increase in cost of living and then it spent three pages explaining to me that while they were doing that our net combined Social Security payment for next year, 2008, would be two hundred and fifty dollars a month less than it was last year; even with the increase. You know why? Because our income, because of investments, took us out of a certain bracket and put us in another bracket; therefore, our Social Security was being reduced.

You know what they told me when I retired? I paid Social Security for forty years. The maximum amount that could be paid each year, by law. When I retired, they told me at seventy and a half years it didn't matter what my income would be; I would be entitled to full social security. That's what they told me. It's in writing. Then the government says, "Oh no, in 2006 they changed the law." Thirteen years after we had been retired. What did they base it on? Economic discrimination. Now, I can make it without the two hundred and fifty dollars a month, obviously. I'm mad as hell in principle. My government made a deal with me. I served my government. I volunteered, I wasn't drafted. I served honorably, got an honorable discharge. I've paid my taxes. I've been a contributing member of my society for eighty-one years, apparently. I am a thirty-third degree Mason which is high as you can go in Free Masonry, Inspector General Honorary. I've been given the Silver Beaver by the boy scouts; which is their highest honor. I didn't deserve any of them but I didn't give them back OK? [Both laugh] As a DeMolay [International] I was a Legion of Honor and Chevalier. I've held every office in the Presbyterian Church up to and including Commissioner to the General Assembly twice. So I've had – society has recognized and honored me far more than I deserve. So it is not because I did not do my part. Then this

government is going to change the name of the game on me based purely on economics. And I say it's unfair. And I say it's discriminatory. And I don't like it, in principle. It's not that – hey, yes it is – if it were fifty cents it would matter because it is the principle of the thing. I'm being discriminated against. I really believe I am. And you can say, "Mr. Lambert, you're privileged economically." Yeah, why? I didn't cheat anybody. I paid my taxes every year.

As a matter of fact, our office manager in Lenoir [North Carolina] went – this was about twenty years ago, went through a two week ordeal with the Internal Revenue Department. And one Friday afternoon, I told them they could use my office because I wasn't in Lenoir once a month, and Gene [Barrier] told me, he said, "Will," he said, "Will, the IRS filed a [unclear]. I told them what you told me to tell them." I said, "You what?" He said, don't you remember?" I said, "Remember what Gene?" He said, "You told me when you hired me that the books of this corporation should be kept though if the IRS ever came in, and audited us, than when you got through fooling with them, that you could tell them to go to hell with impunity. Isn't that what you said?" And I said, "Yes, but you didn't tell them that did you?" And he said, "Yes I did." He said, "They asked me to stay at lunch on Friday, and held me up from lunch and they told me that they knew that you and Mr. Norment were getting money out of the company somehow on the side, but they couldn't find it and that if I would tell them how you were doing it, I would get twenty-five percent of every nickel they collected." He said, "That's what I told them what you told them to say." [Both laugh]

So I'm telling you, I've always paid the government whatever they say I owe by law, but I never dreamed that they would have the audacity to change the law in the middle of the game on me. Now if they want to change it and say that these new economic rules that apply to people who retired in January of 2006, when they passed this new law, fine. But to tell me that in 2007 and I didn't even know it? I resent it. I'm sorry. I don't think it's ethical, it's unprincipled, and I'd be happy to tell any member of the Congress that.

HT: What do you think is the biggest problem facing Greensboro?

WL: Leadership.

HT: Mr. Weill mentioned that as well.

WL: The worst thing – now you're going to think this is pure racism and bigotry, to me the worst thing that ever happened to Greensboro is when we left the at-large system because we were saying to the rest of the world that the ward system, which is what we have now, which has never worked in any major city in the United States because it's replete eventually with graft and pay-offs, and under-the counter, and nepotism, and you name it because the people in a particular district are able to concur favor on local people in their district. And we were going to take that system and make it work here. And instead of Greensboro's

best and brightest running and being elected, At Large, which is what we had, we said, “Oh, we can’t do that, we have divided it up into these wards and then we’re going to have this group and that group.” I think as a result, we’ve watered down the leadership and this is what we have. What you see is what you got. And then the citizenry; we had thirty thousand people vote? Hello? Out of how many thousand? We had thirty thousand vote in the last election out of two hundred and fifty thousand people. Now, granted, a bunch of those are children. That’s one.

Two, why in the world does a student at A&T [North Carolina A&T State University], Bennett [College], Greensboro College, Guilford College, UNCG; why are they allowed to vote in our city council election? For our county commissioners? Why are they allowed to vote on a bond referendum on whether we will spend money in the schools and parks? A student who is a consumer? One of the consumers I was talking about? Why are they voting? Yes, certainly they should vote for the Congressmen of the United States. Certainly they should vote for the Governor if they are a North Carolinian, but if they are from New York State living in Weill Dormitory, they have no business voting here to begin with unless it’s an absentee ballot; but certainly not in a local election. That looks – and I think our local – I think that our Federal Government today is doing a wonderful job of teaching anarchy because they only enforce the laws they find – that they want to enforce and the others, they turn their heads and forget it. Suppose I as an individual should decide that I am going to buy some air time and encourage my fellow citizenry not to pay income tax ‘cause we don’t like income tax. We don’t think it’s fair, or whatever. And I get twenty million of us to go along with that. What will you do with the twenty million of us? Put us in jail? You see where I’m going? That type of logic just won’t hold water. That’s anarchy. And a country can’t survive that. No way. But that is what the Federal Government is in effect doing when it says, “Oh we got twelve to twenty million illegal immigrants here. Well you know we can’t send them all back.” And, “No, we aren’t going to close the border,” apparently. They’re coming through – we’ve only arrested one out of four. We don’t know who they are, the other three. It’s not because we can’t. We don’t have the will to do it, so we’re only enforcing the laws on the books that we want to enforce. The others we’re ignoring. The country can’t survive that. The city of Greensboro can’t survive.

I’ll show you a classic example of the city of Greensboro. We lament downtown. Poor downtown. But what do we do in the process. We build four lane super roads out. I was kidding the guys and our mayor and others in the Rotary. I said, “You know what? I’m going to rent a – charter a bus and load the city council and Florence Gatten who is a friend, and I told Florence, “Florence, I’m going to load all of you on a bus and take you out on Wendover Avenue and show you downtown Greensboro. It’s on Wendover Avenue, west of I-40. Go out and take a look at it. And the reason it’s out there and not downtown is very simple, you put meters on the street and charge me if I’m two minutes late. I got a five or ten dollar ticket to pay at the city hall. I can go to any one of these shopping centers and park the car free for a week and it won’t be towed off and yet you talk

about downtown Greensboro and how interested you are in downtown. I pick up the paper and discover you've hired three or four additional meter maids to check to get those five or ten dollars. You're doing everything in the world you can to funnel traffic out and make it easy for people to get to these shopping centers with a marvelous street system. You're penalizing us for coming downtown and turn right around in the paper and lament that downtown Greensboro is about to drop and blow away. Give me a break!" So, that lack of consistency has been missing in our government. And I don't see a chance of it improving.

HT: Well, what do you see in the future for Greensboro?

WL: Well, number one, geographically, you're the only major city in the United States that's not on a river. So you have no place to dump your effluent. And until you can come to grips psychologically with reusing your effluent instead of purifying it to a certain point and dumping it into Haw River, but recycling it back through Lake Brandt as pure water, you got a problem. Because every time you build another house, build another parking lot, build another driveway, you are adding to the water that is going down Buffalo Creek. It will only handle so much water. After all, it is a creek. At some juncture, you are going to have more run offs than your creeks will handle. Now, to me, certainly by this time, civic leaders should have discovered that there is an optimum size to a city. To say, "Oh, I want Greensboro to grow bigger and bigger," is purely emotional and has precious little thought behind it. To say, "Well, I was born here and my family has been here since 1757 and I don't want it to be a bit bigger, it's too big now." That's emotional. There's no thought behind that. What size city is it that performs the most goods and services to its inhabitants for the least tax dollars? Obviously, it's not Stokesdale [North Carolina] or Summerfield [North Carolina]; it's too small. They don't have any tax base to speak of because they're not taxing them.

So no, their police are really not adequate, their fire protection is adequate but not as good as it should be, their health – they don't have a health department; they depend on the county health department. What size though, New York, Philadelphia, Washington is too big because they're almost bankrupt. New York has been bankrupt once or twice. So that's not – you don't want to be that big. For that reason, what size it is? Is it the size of St. Louis? Is it the size of Madison, Wisconsin? What size city gives adequate police protection, fire protection, health protection, libraries, museums, services for the least tax dollar? That's the size Greensboro should be or High Point [North Carolina] should be or any city should be. That's the maximum size. And at that juncture you say, "Don't come here. Go somewhere else. We don't want you. And it's not because we don't like you, it's because tax-wise, we are at an optimum. That's using your head not your emotion.

HT: How about the annexation controversy that's been going on? How do you feel about that?

WL: Why in the world would you annex people when you can't perform goods and services to the people you've got? Now I've said all along, and no one would listen. And I don't have that much longer to live, so it doesn't matter. I'll just stick my neck out and say, "You'll never drink a drop of water from Randleman Dam." And I'll tell you why and I'll tell you what I told them at City Hall, but they wouldn't listen. For years, finishing supply people; Gilbert Spruance and Sherwin Williams, and I can't call them all, but a half a dozen finishing in High Point that furnished furniture finishing for the furniture industries dumped their waste every Saturday – every Saturday afternoon, every Sunday morning in the High Point landfill on the banks of the Deep River. It was loaded with lead paint and lead in the finish because in those days, I'm going back sixty or seventy years ago, it went on for fifty years. We didn't know we were harming the environment with that. We didn't know anything about it. They dumped it right in there. It's there now. Every Friday afternoon, Saturday morning four, count them, four mirror companies dumped their residuals and broken mirrors in the landfill on the banks of Deep River.

Where did that mercury go? Now what I'm told by an environmentalist that one child's play shoe that lights up when they run has a little mercury switch in it and when abandoned in a lake in Minnesota, a ninety acre lake, you can't eat any fish out of the lake for fifty years because of the mercury in the switch in that shoe? But to me, that's a miniscule amount of mercury compared to what was dumped into the landfill at High Point for fifty years by mirror companies. And again, they didn't know, they did not that intent – maliciously or intentionally. There was not hatred or anything or carelessness. They didn't know.

HT: Now where is this landfill? You said it was on the Deep River which goes into the Randleman Dam. Correct?

WL: Yeah. It's right over here on I-40. You can see it as you go by. I mean I-85. It's right there. Do you know where the High Point Waste Treatment plant is? On the banks of the Deep River? Every bit of the effluent that goes through the sewer pipes and is flushed out of the johns at High Point is treated at that waste water plant and the waste water goes into the Randleman Dam and I guess during the drought we can say, "High Point, for heaven's sake go home at lunch and flush your johns, we need the water." [Both laugh] Back to what I said, emotionally and mentally, we're going to have to get over this thing of dumping water in – people up at our farm, at our new subdivision, are environmentally much kinder to the earth than those who have spent most of our lives living in Greensboro. Do you know why? They have a well three hundred feet deep. I have one at the farm up there. We use that water, we utilize that water there, put it in our septic system, and it leeches right back into the land doesn't it? What do you do with it in Greensboro?

HT: I assume it goes to the waste treatment facility.

WL: And where does the waste treatment plant take it? Dumps it in the Haw River.

HT: Haw River.

WL: And where does the Haw River take it? To the ocean, ultimately. So every bit of the water that you use in here in this city, these millions of gallons winds up in the Atlantic Ocean. You're being much unkind to the environment than someone who is living out in the country on our subdivision who has a well and they use the water out of the well and put it right back in the land; right back where they live. But I'm back to what I said. I'm not sure you'll ever live long enough to drink water from the Randleman Dam. I believe it's that polluted that you'll pay hell. The cost – now eventually – I think the cost is – this is just what I think – why didn't they go ahead and run a pipe on up here. The lake's full of water. We've got to have that raw water up here in Greensboro don't we?

HT: That's my understanding.

WL: That's my understanding too. Why didn't they do that five years ago when they started the dam? Why didn't they run the pipe up here to run the water? Then this drought we're having – they could be piping water up here – could have been piping it two years ago. The lake has been full of water for over a year; rim full. I maintain – I maintain the reason we're dragging our feet is they don't know if they can purify that water under the present technology, economically, to use it. Why else would they be dragging their feet? So where's Greensboro going? I think that Greensboro is probably as big as Greensboro can get.

HT: Because of the water situation.

WL: Because of the water situation. Not just the water we don't have, but getting rid of the water we create. You see we've only looked at one side of that equation. Right now if you get four or five days rain and you go down to the waste treatment plant in east Greensboro, that creek is running slam jam full of water and then we add more to it? You are going to flood everything in the eastern part of the county. [Laughs] From the run-off. You go no place to put the effluent. So I don't know where Greensboro is going. Well gosh, we've talked for two hours.

HT: Almost two hours. Just a few more questions about the Rotary Club. When did you join the Rotary Club?

WL: Well, I joined – you see I've been a member of two Rotary Clubs. I've been a member of Summit and then I transferred over to the Rotary Club of Greensboro. I think now, I'm going on guessing, I think I joined Summit Rotary Club about 1972 or three. I joined Greensboro Rotary Club in 1983 but I was a Rotarian before that and why? I had more friends in the Greensboro Rotary Club. There were more people in the Greensboro – in the Rotary Club of Greensboro that I had grown up with and I had known. That was primarily –

HT: And how have you been involved with the Rotary Club of Greensboro?

WL: I was district chairman for remedial reading – reading you know for literacy – literacy program for the district. District 7060 or something like that and I have been chairman for the literacy program for the schools. Those are the two primary things that I've done.

HT: Mr. Lambert, I don't have any more questions for you, do you have anything else you would like to add that we haven't covered this afternoon? [Both laugh]

WL: I'll think about it.

HT: Well, thank you very much. It's been a real joy talking to you this afternoon. It really has.

WL: Well I didn't really live up to Charlie's – what time did you start with Charlie?

HT: Well we actually finished – I a little over an hour and a half on tape but we continued to talk for another hour and a half.

WL: [Laughs] But I was thinking about – there's bound to be other things that I can think of that – I don't know what they are.

HT: Well, again, thank you very much. I'll go ahead and turn off –

WL: Thank you sir.

HT: OK. All right.

[End of interview]

[End Tape 2, Side A]

*The foregoing transcript of the oral history interview of Mr. William A. Lambert, taken on November 28, 2007, was reviewed and revised by Mr. Lambert. The original recording and transcript are housed at the University Archives and Manuscripts Department, Walter Clinton Jackson Library, The University of North Carolina Greensboro.