

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

INTERVIEWEE: Boyd Morris

INTERVIEWER: William Link

DATE: December 9, 1986

[Begin Tape 1, Side A]

WILLIAM LINK: This is an interview with Mr. Boyd Morris. This is December 9, 1986, and we are at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Mr. Morris, I wonder if you could say something, a little bit about your background, including your--begin with your full name.

BOYD MORRIS: Robert Boyd Morris. I've lived here in Greensboro since 1912, and I now reside at 3803 New Garden Park, townhouse. And my wife is Eleanor Morris. I have one son, Robert Boyd, Jr., and he has two grandsons. And we have, as I said, been here since 1912. And I believe you might say that I'm a native of Greensboro, although I was born in Haw River, North Carolina, and moved here when I was three months old. So, I do claim to be a native of Greensboro--

WL: Rightfully so.

BM: --and [have had a] long life here.

WL: Do you--your parents were--who were your parents?

BM: My father was Joseph C. Morris, and my mother was Anna Morris, both now deceased. And I had a step-mother who came aboard when I was three years old. So I knew my step-mother, of course, for almost fifty years of my life. And she, too, is deceased.

WL: You--I wonder if you could say something about your employment history. Where you worked and--

BM: Well, I have had one or two jobs before, before my stint in the cafeteria business. I worked for my father at--who owned the North State Milling Company here in

Greensboro. And I worked there as a child and as a young man, and went from there to the Atlantic Coal and Oil Company.

Back then salaries were precious low. I was making twelve dollars and a half a week when I worked for my father, and I got a raise to fifteen dollars a week. And then I was offered a job selling coal, oil, air conditioning stokers. You don't hear much about stokers today, because they're coal fired. But that job paid me twenty-five dollars a week, and I thought I was in heaven then.

So I left my father and went with the Atlantic Coal company. And I stayed there about three years until--maybe less--when through a series of events my father became interested in the Mayfair Cafeteria, through a series of events to get part ownership, and then later on became the full owner of the Mayfair Cafeteria. I worked--he asked me to come with him there and help run the cafeteria. And I believe I was twenty-three years old by that time.

And I met a beautiful, beautiful young lady, who was a graduate of the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. We then called it Woman's College. And so, being this gorgeous person, I fell in love with her, and had my first date with her on September the nineteenth, and married her on January first.

WL: This was in what year?

BM: In 19--I married her in 1935. So we've been married--January first, which is three weeks away, we will be married fifty-two years. And, by the same date, I entered the restaurant business, the cafeteria business, and I've been in the cafeteria business for fifty-two years. So as the secretary of the state of North Carolina [Thad A. Eure] says, he's the oldest rat in the barn. And I believe I'm the oldest rat in the barn in Greensboro.

WL: Yes.

BM: In the food business.

WL: Well, I'd like to ask you just to think back as a child. You were born in 1912. In the twenties, or earlier than that, how do you remember childhood contacts, what kind of contacts there were, you know, as a child between whites and blacks?

BM: Well, I lived at 402 East Lee Street, which is one block, a block and a half from the black community.

WL: When you were a child? You grew up there?

BM: As a child, yes. I lived there all my young life. We--I had many, many black friends, and we really thought nothing about race. We, we enjoyed the company of black children and white children. We played together. We were, you might say, neighbors, one block removed. And there was no, no feeling, no animosity, nothing to rankle the tempers of either, either race. We got along beautifully.

I remember many, many things about Greensboro as a young city--cobblestone streets downtown, trackless trolleys. I remember watching as a child the sinking of the piles for the foundation of the Jefferson Standard Life Insurance Building. It was remarkable. They hit water. They hit a very mushy soil there--underground springs all through that downtown area. And they sank piles that you thought were going, as the old saying, to China. They, they went down so deep. But we stood and watched all of that develop.

There was so much about Greensboro that I remember as a child. The city was from the railroad track to what was then the O. Henry Hotel, which is a matter of about ten blocks. That was downtown Greensboro. And today Greensboro spreads far and wide. And little did I realize then that I would be a part of the development of the city of Greensboro, and annexation, and highways, inner loops, outer loops, that came about in my later life as, as an elected official of the city.

We, we had a marvelous childhood. I lived near the schools. Then we went to the nearest school to us, which was Pearson Street School. I went there as more or less kindergarten, first grade. And then Asheboro Street, which adjoined the playground, and then Caldwell School. And then from Caldwell, I graduated to Spring Street High School, which is the junior high. And then I was in the first class that entered Senior High School, which is now Grimsley High School. And we had many, many delightful memories of those years--basketball, football, all the sports.

WL: That was the first year--first graduating--you were in the first graduating class at Senior High?

BM: I was in the first graduating class at Senior High. And [so was] Mr. Charlie Phillips, who later became associated with your University of North Carolina at Greensboro. And we had many close relationships.

Little did I realize, sitting on the city council in the later years that, that we would make a masterful decision to close Walker Avenue and let the university here have that land to build buildings upon. And we, we--it was very confrontational then, whether we should or should not close Walker Avenue. But my thought was, what would Greensboro pay to get Woman's College--University of North Carolina at Greensboro--what would we pay as a city to get this institution to come here? That was my motivation in voting to close Walker Avenue, to enhance the growth of this great university.

WL: I'd like to get back to the subject of segregation as you remember as a child, and that is legally required segregation. Of course Greensboro, like the rest of the South, in the teens, and the twenties, and the thirties, and the forties, and the fifties, lived in a system, you know, where, by law, one was required to do certain things. And among those things was to segregate racially. Did, as you remember it, did that make any impression on you? Or did it--what sort of impression did it make, if it did?

BM: Well, we knew nothing about racial conflict. We didn't realize what was coming down the road.

WL: Sure.

BM: I had no feeling about it. I have, and I have said publicly, that I believe that I, Boyd Morris, has as many black friends as any man in the city of Greensboro. I have letters from A&T [North Carolina A&T State University] students, as well as from the University of [North Carolina at] Greensboro. Letters of thank--thanking me, as the owner of the Mayfair Cafeteria, to--because working at the Mayfair enabled that person, black as well as white, to get their college education.

And I had the fortune, good fortune to be able to buy the champion 4-H baby beef at the annual sale from a little girl. Her last name was Cobb, and she happened to be the champion raiser of the beef for four consecutive years. And she wrote me a very endearing letter that, that due to the purchase of her animals, that I had paid her way through the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

And letters like that--and I've gotten them from many of the students at A&T who, who have gone on to become superintendent of schools, black men who--one, Mr. Jones, was superintendent of schools over in an adjoining county-- and many, many letters from young men who worked their way, through the Mayfair, through school. It was a joint effort. I benefited, they benefited. No contract is good unless it benefits both parties. And certainly I benefited by their skill and their--I say, love for me.

I use the word love. I think love probably is an overworked word. But I don't really believe that. I think there's Christian love and there's another love. But my love is Christian love, and I don't--I'm just so pleased that I can say that I know of nobody that I hate. And it's been that way all my life. And I--my wife sometimes says, "Boy, you're unreal." But it's not a, it's not a game. It's right in the heart. And I just have been most fortunate. God has been good to me in many ways. I've had ups and downs, financially, and all of this integration thing that has happened to Greensboro and the world, and particularly the United States. It's going on in Africa now.

But we--I just have been able to continue to love people, and love what I'm doing and have a great respect for anybody that is in my presence, unless they prove otherwise, that they don't deserve respect. I think with all of this, responsibility is paramount.

You've got to be responsible in life. And if you're not responsible then you're not going to have respect from yourself, from other people. Simple psychology.

WL: Sure. Would you, would you say that segregation was pretty much accepted by both blacks and whites back in the, say, pre-1950 period?

BM: Well, I, of course, was on the other side. I've said many times, "Gosh, I don't know what I would have done if I had been black." But, I, I did what was the law of the land in running my place of business. The law of the land was segregated, segregated business. Everything, not--my restaurant was just a guinea pig in the whole make-up of things--the churches, and the funeral homes. Funeral homes today are pretty much segregated. And--but doctors, lawyers, every facet of the community abided by the law of the land.

And it was painful to me. I would be the first to say--it was painful to me when the governor of Maryland drove up in his big limousine to my front door with a state trooper and a black servant. And I had to let the governor and his entourage come in the front door, but the servant who was with the party--whatever title he might have had--had to be fed in the kitchen.

It disturbed me, and I have--maybe, I just don't know. Through all of this I continue to remember. And traveling people who came through Greensboro with their maids and their nannies looking after their children, I had to send the box lunches out to the car for the black help to eat, and the white came in the front door and ate. It bothered me, but it was the law of the land. And I don't think it was a cop-out. I don't believe that. I think that if I had brought them all in the front door then I'd have had an uprising of the white people. And if this would have happened, I've used the expression a two-edged sword--you cut either way--and, but I did have an inner feeling of regret that this whole thing was happening.

Greensboro was the guinea pig of the nation. It all started at Woolworth's counter--it's been documented heavily--and then it moved on up the street, to us and to S&W Cafeteria. Marriott--Marriot company had a restaurant out on Summit Avenue.

WL: Which restaurant was that? Do you remember?

BM: It was Marriott Hot Shoppe, they called it.

WL: Oh yes, right, the Hot Shoppe.

BM: It's now Libby Hill Seafood today. They fell. We all fell downtown, due to integration and due to the, the exodus of businesses from downtown to the shopping centers. It's true across America. But across America, too, downtown has gone by the board. I think--I don't want to get ahead of the story that I'm telling you. We had many meetings of the

local businesses and churches. When we entered into this strong, militant division of black and white, of wanting to ride in the front of the buses, go in the front door of doctor's offices, lawyer's offices, eat in the restaurants by the front door. When all this came about, A&T College here was the soul of the backbone.

Jesse Jackson was president of the student body at A&T. And Jesse, and Mr. [Ralph] Abernathy and Mr. [James] Farmer, who were head of CORE and the NAACP, the attorney [Floyd] McKissick, all came nine straight nights. They came and sat, laid down in the streets of Greensboro, from the O. Henry Hotel to Kress's--if you're familiar with downtown Greensboro at that time--and from Davie Street beyond the S&W--it was the King Cotton Hotel then--down as far as the county courthouse.

They laid down, the paper said, two thousand strong. They were parading. And Jesse Jackson and the paraders came up--the demonstrators came up to my front door. And I was--I had heard they were coming. I set my--three straight nights I closed my restaurant. But I stood at the front door. I didn't want any damage. I didn't want my help to be subjected to this type of demonstration and possible violence and injury. We didn't know what to expect. We knew that they were militant. We knew that they were chanting and marching and laying down in the street. We knew that the police were hauling them off in the paddy wagon, and they had to set up a temporary jail at the [War] Memorial Stadium. And all of this happened. So--

WL: Would you say that the atmosphere was definitely one of fear?

BM: Oh, it was of fear. And we--at that time a five hundred dollar dinner, supper meal, was considered real good, real good. And it fell off to twenty-five dollars a night, thirty-five dollars a night. In a five year period I could not get it up over one hundred and thirty-five dollars. Well, I was losing money.

WL: This was after 1963?

BM: Right. This, the act [Civil Rights Act] went into effect in '64, I believe. But all this was the forerunner of all of that.

And Jesse Jackson put his nose against my nose as I was standing at my front door. And he says "I'm coming in." And I said, "Over my dead body you're coming in."

And he said, "Why don't you let me come in?"

And I said, "Jesse, I'm not going to serve demonstrators."

And he says, "Well, I love you."

And I said, "Well, Jesse, I love you, but you're not coming in."

And so this goes on. And the police are there. Columbia Broadcasting, CBS, was--had the camera on us. And I was not grandstanding, of course. I was, in my heart I, I just deplored the whole situation. But I had done everything that I knew in the community to

do right. From an elder in the church to mayor of Greensboro, president of the Merchants Association, sales executives, the Chamber of Commerce, nine years on the board of directors. You name it, I was there, doing my civic duty. This came about through, really, no fault of mine. I was abiding by the law. And I told, told Jesse, and I told Abernathy, and I told Mr. Farmer, I said, "When the law is changed, I'll be the first to capitulate."

WL: But you, you felt you were between a rock and a hard place?

BM: It was, definitely, definitely. I used the expression "two-edged sword"--I was cut either way. I was hurt either way. That if I said, "Come on in," then I'd have lost my white business. Lost a lot of them anyhow, and it didn't--I didn't go bankrupt, but I became insolvent, and I was losing money. I had a real nice fat bank account, and in five years I owed the government right at sixty thousand dollars in taxes I could not pay. I did finally pay them off and--but I didn't, I didn't want the situation I was in. I had tried desperately to avoid it. I am on record in all of this that--

And the Human Relations Commission at that time was headed by Bland Worley, I believe, who was president of Wachovia Bank. And he had meetings, and they called me in singly. Why they chose me, I presume, was because I had been active in the political arena, and again, not egotistical, but I'd been a "leading citizen," quote, unquote. But I told them, I said, "Mr. Worley, and gentlemen and ladies," I said, "I'll make you a proposition." This is on the record. I said, "If you will tell me, and you will shake my hand, right now, that you will publicly tell that you will integrate your offices, that you will go--10 percent of your staff will be open to black people, I'll integrate the Mayfair Cafeteria tomorrow morning." Well, the subject was changed. They weren't talking about that. They wanted Boyd Morris, the Mayfair Cafeteria to be the leader, the guinea pig or whatever.

WL: So their position was they wanted you to integrate?

BM: Right.

WL: At that point?

BM: And--but I made them a sporting proposition and it was not on a whim. It was positive. I also met with the top leaders of Greensboro, all of the top corporations of Greensboro, and did the identical same thing. We met at the West Market Street [United Methodist] Church. And there were probably fifty of the top executives there, and I was the only one in the restaurant business. They asked me to integrate. And I said, "Gentlemen, I'll integrate tomorrow morning, if you will let it be publicly known that 10 percent of your

office staff will be colored from here out.” We called it colored then. They prefer black, I presume, today. But--

WL: That was the usage then.

BM: Right, and--but again they--I might have committed suicide at the table. But I did it again at the church--of the ministers, the Piedmont Baptist Association, the Ministerial Association.

WL: This was all during 1963?

BM: That’s right, ’63 and ’64. And I told them I--the Junior Chamber of Commerce [Jaycees]--all of them. I made every one of them the same proposition, as God is my judge. None of them, not one of them, even listened wholeheartedly to the suggestion.

WL: How did they respond?

BM: Negatively. Negatively. And I’m not, I’m not--I have no vendetta against them. I was putting the monkey back on their back. I would have gladly integrated the next day. I would gladly have done it. But I didn’t want to do it alone. But I told them, and I told the ministers, I said, “You announce in the pulpit Sunday that you will, that from this point on, the Presbyterian Church, or the Methodist Church, is now integrated, and I’ll give you my word of honor that I will integrate, too. I’ll integrate tomorrow morning. I won’t wait till Sunday. You give me your word that you’ll do it.”

They said, “Well, we can’t do that. We can’t do that. We got a board to go through.”

I said, “I own this business, and I button my coat and the directors have met.” But I said, “All I want is for you to tell me that you’ll do it, and let it be publicly known.” And I said, “Then I will do it.”

But nobody, nobody took me up. And nobody integrated until the 1964 act was passed in Congress. And I, I got a call from Washington from--I did not hire a lawyer during this. They say if you represent yourself you’ve got a fool for a client, but I didn’t see any need to. I had not done anything. I had complied with all the laws of the land, and I didn’t see any need to add an additional cost.

WL: Excuse me--

[End Tape 1, Side A--Being Tape 1, Side B]

BM: You asked me a question--

WL: Okay, yeah, we were talking about 1963, and you were mentioning that--the resistance on the part of other businesses in Greensboro to integrate. And the question that came to mind to me was why there so much attention--I mean, why did everybody else want you to integrate, and at the same time not want to integrate themselves? Why so much attention on you?

BM: Well, I have wondered myself. And the only thing that, that I felt, that having been mayor, and having been the leading operator, food operator, in the community, that they wanted me to lead the parade. And I didn't want to go out front. I would have gladly done it had they simply given me a handshake of what they would likewise do. They--it was not forthcoming. I never received it from the first business house, the first church or the first minister, the first lawyer, the first doctor. Not one of them ever communicated with me on that basis.

So I'm--again, I repeat that all these people were friends. And as I said one day in talking about it, like lawyers--when lawyers get into court they hack each other up pretty bad. They walk out arm in arm and wrapped up in arms around the shoulders, as friends. And I--thank goodness that that's the way I ended up with all of them. I don't know anybody that has a lingering feeling of contempt for me. There may be, but to my knowledge I know of no one that really feels--and I use the expression sometimes, I'm a dead hero. But that's not the hero that I want to be. I'd rather be a hero in some other facet of business.

WL: Well, let's go back to 1963 again, and talk about the other restaurant businesses in downtown Greensboro. Were you pretty much in--was your, your position pretty much consistent with everyone else's?

BM: Everybody. We only had one or two meetings. The mayor at that time called us--all the restaurants and hotels--into a meeting. And there had been some confrontation of many types, where the police had to intervene, the police had to arrest, trespassing. And the mayor was getting as frustrated as we were. But in this meeting, we said no, we would not integrate. We had no collective body that was talking. We were talking as individuals. And the mayor said, "Well, how much longer do you think the City of Greensboro can protect you people?"

And I said, "Mr. Mayor, I have been in your seat, and my simple answer is, as long as you're mayor, you represent the law abiding citizen. And we're law abiding citizens. You change the law and we'll be--continue to be law abiding citizens. So the answer is simple, as long as you're mayor, then you protect the people of the city of Greensboro." Well, that didn't endear him to me, but I've always been this way. If you

ask me a question, I'll give you an answer. You may not like it, but it's--as long as it's from my heart, then that's all I know. I don't want to double-talk anybody.

And go back when all this thing hit. I called my staff together, and I said--I had sixty-five employees at this time. And I said, "My name is Boyd Morris. I have been your boss, and I am not going to stand here and tell you that I'm a good man. If you don't know what I am, then I'm lost. I am the same today [as] I was yesterday, and I'm going to be the same tomorrow. I'm not going to tell you I'm a good man. You know what I am, and you know where I'm coming from. If you think I'm wrong and you think I have horns, if you'll give me two days notice if you don't want to work for me, I will pay you a week's pay. Give me two days notice. I'll finish the week payout with you. There'll be no hard feelings. But all I want you to know is that we are experiencing something that is new to America. This is going on all over America. And frankly, I don't know any other way to do it except what I'm doing. If I'm wrong, God knows I'm wrong. But I don't. So, what I'm saying to you is just give me two days notice, if you think that I'm a bad man."

And they all stood up and said, "Mr. Morris, we understand, and we're with you." I did not lose a single employee during all the confrontation. And, and they stayed with me all that period of time.

And when I went out of business, I took nineteen Mayfair employees to Thomasville. I had a cafeteria in Thomasville, and I took nineteen of them over there everyday. Picked them up at their front door, brought them back at night to their front door, [and] picked them up the next day. For five and a half years, I carried nineteen employees to Thomasville to run my cafeteria over there, and I brought them back every night. And I don't think that if I had been a bad man, with no heart, or whatever you might say, I don't believe that nineteen black people would have stayed with me.

WL: What was the attitude exactly of the city, city government, during the crisis? My impression is that they were an advocate attempting to persuade you to segregate. Is that accurate?

BM: Yeah. Well, they were. I think they were completely frustrated because it was happening on the buses, it was happening everywhere. There was a planned attack from the black people, and the militant of the black. And a lot of it stemmed out of A&T College here, with Jesse and all of those. But I, I think they were frustrated and they didn't know anything to do but say, "Let's get it over with and get on with the city," which is what we wanted to do, for goodness sake. That's what we wanted to do. But how do you do it when the law reads as it did read? We could have--and I don't think we would have been punished in any way had we gone on and opened the doors to blacks. Whatever punishment we would have received would have been by business or lack of business. That would have been the simple end result.

I remember when I was mayor in 1955-56. I could tell this thing was coming on. This was--I'm not too good at math--this was seven years before [the] 1964 Civil Rights Act was--the law was passed. Let's see, am I right? Eight, eight or nine years before Governor [Luther] Hodges spoke to the student body at A&T College. I was mayor. I was there on the platform. I introduced him. I introduced the governor, and as generally happened, there's a standing ovation. Half the student body stood, half of them sat down.

Would the--the Harrison Auditorium was ringed, completely encircled with the ROTC. They'd had a parade that day on the open field, and we marched into Harrison Auditorium. And you talk about confrontation. And this was way before anything happened. But they--around the auditorium was the cadets with the white pants, white helmets, and blue uniforms, and their rifles. And they popped those rifles, parade, you know, as they would do in the military procedure. And it's beautiful to watch, but it's awesome when you've got a little cloud hanging over you. And so when they--when I introduced the governor, they sat and they stood.

Well, it was perfectly obvious that there was a conflict there. And some of the dignitaries on the platform did not stand, they sat. And then when the governor started talking, he started talking about the history of A&T, and what the state of North Carolina had done for A&T College--the amount of money that they had received, more than UNCG, more than State College [North Carolina State University] at that time. He was throwing figures. And they started shuffling their feet. And I think they must have had sand on the floor, because it was terrible scratching as they shuffled their feet in the auditorium. And it upset the governor, and he--

WL: It was loud enough so that it interrupted the speech?

BM: Oh it was very, very loud. And then he used the word Negro. And every time he said Negro, they'd hold their hand up. One, two, three, and they'd hold both hands up. And every time he said Negro college, Negro college, they'd hold their fingers up, to where--

WL: Counting the times that he said it.

BM: Right. Well, he stopped the speech and he says, "I don't know what is going on, and I don't know what I've said to infuriate, evidently infuriate you students. I don't," he says. "I don't think--" This is documented, in the newspaper. "I don't know what I have said that would lead you to disrespect the governor of North Carolina, the office of governor of North Carolina." And he said, "I think it's deplorable that you have disgraced yourself. You haven't disgraced me; you've disgraced yourself and your university by what you're doing." And he said, "I don't know where you're coming from on it." And then he cut his talk short, I'm sure. And he said, "I want to finish my talk, and I don't want to be interrupted by you, by you students."

So when he finished, he made some closing remark. And then, [Dr. Ferdinand D.] Bluford was president, I think. He got up and he apologized to the governor for the act. He said, "I didn't know this was going to happen--had no knowledge of it." And he said, "I apologize to you for what has happened."

But that was really the first militant thing that had crossed my path in all of this. And of course, it gave me that little insight as to what maybe to expect down the line. And it came on, but it didn't come real fast. I mean, it took another five years for it to blow.

WL: Was there any evidence--this was 1955, Governor Hodges' speech, and the Woolworth's sit-ins are in February 1960. No further evidence of black militance, or militancy between that?

BM: No, I didn't see any. I didn't feel, I didn't feel anything. I thought that it was more or less somebody in the university who--there's always a leader, you know, that'll do these things, get things started to disobedience. And that's what they were doing. They were being disobedient.

Another facet of my relation with the black community is being a born-again Christian. And being mayor of the city, I have been asked to speak in many churches. I was asked to speak in two of the black churches--Saint James, Reverend--goodness gracious--Reverend [Julius] Douglas, Reverend Douglas. I spoke in the pulpit twice at his church. And got--I was looking through some memoirs the other night and found a letter from Rev. Douglas thanking me for what I had to say and coming. And wanted me to come back, which I did. But I spoke on layman's Sunday, and then I spoke on Father's Day. And I'd like to hear the tape of that message that I gave. It would be interesting. [laughs] I'm not a lay preacher by any means, but I have a great understanding, a great feeling for the Bible and the way God--Jesus tells us to live. So I try to do that. If I fall short, then it's just on my own inability to understand. But in my heart, I would do no man wrong.

WL: Well, you were mayor in 1955-56 and city council--you were first elected in 1949. Is that correct?

BM: Right.

WL: I'm curious [about] your recollections about the first indications about desegregation. *Brown* decision, *Brown v. Board of Education* decision comes in 1954. And that, of course, orders, ultimately orders desegregation. As mayor, what was the point of view of the city council, what was the response of city council to *Brown*? Was there any response?

BM: Well, the schools were more involved then, and that's where the thrust of it all went. And not being on the school board I've really missed the--

WL: It wasn't in your area. It didn't affect you.

BM: It didn't come across our desk as much as getting people to serve on the school board. And we appointed the school board back then. Now it's an elected school board, and from all the confrontation they're having today, by far we had the best set-up, to appoint a school board. And we, we appointed men of consequence and substance. Not to say that people today on the school board don't have substance, but they certainly are fighting one another to a heavy degree.

WL: Sure. Yeah, indeed. There were, there were black members of the city council.

BM: There were. Well, Dr. [William] Hampton served with me. I was a councilman and he was a councilman. I was mayor pro tem four years, and Dr. Hampton served at that time with me. I think he served two terms. And his health gave way on him, and he declined to run. He was a very popular black man and a very able councilman, very able councilman. And he had the full support of all of the council members. And I really believe that--and I don't apologize at all--I do not like a ward system of government. And you can read the paper today, and they've gone to the ward system. And all the, all the ward system does is make the man that's from the ward do everything to get what he can for that ward.

I think that if you're elected to the council, you should have the whole city in your mind to help--not sectionalism, ward system, as it is now. I think you just run into--I read only this week that, that the mayor pro tem made a statement that now, that council meetings ran fifty to sixty minutes longer than they did prior to this ward system. They, they want to get in their licks for their ward. And I know from what I read in the big cities that have ward system, it gets corrupt, because they become little mayors of their ward. Little job seekers come to them to get them a job, which--whether they're qualified or not qualified. It's a payoff of a kind.

I would say on that--I used the word payoff--we did not have any, we did not have any feeling of ill--wrongdoing in the nine years I was on the council. There was no controversy. There was no indication that somebody was doing something for profit. It was all done for the good of the city, whether you can believe that, whether the public can believe that. I think the record would prove it to be a true statement. But I don't know what's in the mind of some people, so it would stand up to debate.

WL: How well do you think that city government served the interests of the black community in the fifties when you were--

BM: I think it served them well. And I told Dr. Hampton, I said, "Dr. Hampton, I think you've been on the council long enough to know that anybody in the city of Greensboro, from whatever section, everything that they receive is on merit and not on the dole system. It's on a merit system. Now you have requests for things down in your area, the east side of Greensboro. It's our area too. It's not your area, it's our area. But I want to appoint you as the emissary to handle those complaints. And I'll personally go with you, I'll do anything. But I want them to know, through your mouth, that they're not being taken advantage of, or some other section, as they say the northwestern section of Greensboro gets all the favors. That is not true." But--

WL: Was that communicated--

BM: What?

WL: You think that was effectively communicated that way?

BM: Yes, it was. And he understood. And he said, he told me several times when he served on the council, he said, "Well, I don't think that the council could be any fairer than they are to every section of the city of Greensboro." And I said, "It makes me very happy to hear you say that."

I also spoke in his church at one Sunday service. But we had a great rapport. There was some infighting on the council at one time and--well, it was--I was to be mayor two years before I became mayor. I had the four votes. And Bob Frazier wanted to stay on the council as mayor for two more years. And I had the four votes, and he got furious with me because, you know, you have a seven member council. You have four votes and he has three votes, you've won.

And, but I had the four votes to be mayor two years before I became mayor. And I had the highest vote of--on the, on the total vote of the city. I'd won that election, strongly. But I capitulated--is that a good word?--to Bob. And I let--Dr. Hampton was my first vote, or fourth vote, whatever you want to say. And I called Dr. Hampton and I said, "Dr. Hampton, I'm going to let you switch your vote to Frazier, which will give him four votes and me three votes. I want your vote for mayor pro tem."

And he said, "Well, you've got it either way. You've got it for mayor if you want it."

I said, "No, I want you to have the honor--whatever the honor might be--to let Mr. Frazier serve a second term as mayor. But if it'll help you, then that's what I want to do. You've been a good councilman, and I appreciate your friendship."

And so I let Dr. Hampton swing his vote over to Frazier at the council meeting, when the mayor was elected. And then he turned and voted for me for mayor pro tem,

which gave me my four votes again, [which I] needed to be elected. The council then elected the mayor. And the mayor today is elected at large. The seven councilmen selected a mayor from the seven.

WL: From the rest.

BM: That's right. And that's the way it was done. But now it's--the mayor's elected at large, which I approve of and worked to get that done.

WL: One of the complaints about the at-large system was that--by the people that wanted the district system that we have now--was that a small group of people controlled things. Was this the case in the 1950s, do you think?

BM: I think they will always say that. I really saw--it's that way today with this council, and they've got nine I believe on the council now. Still, the major decisions are made up here in the Jefferson Standard Building. I think that, that the shakers and the doers are going to be--in every city, the money, the money talks. And what can--I shouldn't say this, but what can a black councilman do on his own? He can't do anything. He's got to have five votes now to do anything.

WL: That's right. He has to work in a coalition.

BM: Right. That's right. So what can, what can they know about multi-million dollar transactions? They've never been confronted with them. A lot of them have not met a payroll. What do they know about interest? What do they know about--I'm not saying that they don't know. And a lot of them are smart, and they might, and I give them the benefit.

I've made a little inside joke all my life about I'm second, and you try harder when you're second. [laughs] But I don't know that the council can do a whole lot without the money--this small core we're talking about--without them saying yes. They can pass all the laws they want, but to get anything done in this city--like they tried and did a marvelous job on trying to get this fashion--

WL: Apparel Mart.

BM: --Apparel Mart to move to Greensboro. They--they did-- moved heaven and earth to do that. But it was that inner group, again, that did it. It wasn't--the council would have given them all the help they could, but those are the shakers and the doers, I think. And it's always going to be that way. I don't see any way to get around it, because, if I might say, I have not been in the big money. I've been on the outside of the big money. I've

been close to it. But the money boys--I've seen them do it. I've seen them call up and say, "Look, I gave you a hundred and fifty thousand dollars for your project. I need your company to do something for my project." And, "Okay, put me down for a hundred thousand."

And this is the way they jockey for money, and for donations, and for help in all the good projects that go on in America. It's done by "I scratch your back, you scratch mine." Was it wrong? I don't say it's wrong. But it's the way that we do.

WL: And Greensboro's not necessarily unusual in that respect either.

BM: No, no. If you read about Chicago or White Plains, New York, or whatever. It's all the same.

WL: Was the city council in the fifties, would you say--you mentioned a couple of confrontations that they had while you were on it. Was this unusual, or usually worked by consensus or agreement?

BM: Well, yes, we--or the one that was a personality thing with the mayor and me. The mayor wanted to fire the Public Works director, Hugh Medford, who had been with the City of Greensboro, I believe, thirty-eight years. And the most remarkable, the most intelligent, the most dedicated man I've ever known. He has more knowledge of the city of Greensboro--pipelines, waterlines, sewage lines, everything--in his head. He can--you ask him a question, he can tell you right now where to go, what to do, and what it takes to do a remedy. And Frazier wanted to fire him.

WL: Why was that?

BM: Why? Because--I asked him why--I said, "Why do you want?" And he said, "Because he won't do what I want him to do." I said, "Bob, you're not the city manager. You're the mayor. We operate under city--"

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

WL: Okay, we were talking about Mayor Frazier, and the problem with Mr. Medford.

BM: Well, he wanted to fire Medford, and I told him that unless Medford had done something--malfeasance of office, or he'd stolen, whatever--if he had some real serious charge, I'd listen to it. But because he wouldn't do what he wanted him to do, I couldn't, I couldn't fire a man for that. Been with the city thirty-eight years and knew all about the city that

he knows. So, I said, "You've got four votes." I said, "Why don't you just go on and fire him? You don't need the fifth vote, you've got four."

And he said, "Well, we want you to go along with us."

I said, "Not today, not tonight, not tomorrow, not next month. He's a friend of mine. He is absolutely the finest Greensboro City employee that has ever been. Put that in the record." And I said, "That's the way I feel, and you're not going to change my mind. And as a matter of fact, I'm going to change yours."

And I set out the next morning to get the thing corrected. And I told him, I said, "Bob, you're a lawyer." And I said, "Archie Cannon, you're a lawyer." And I said, "I'm just--" And I said, "Dr. Hampton, I cannot believe that you are going to vote to discharge Mr. Medford." I said, "I can't believe it."

And he said, "Well, I'm going to do what the mayor wants to do."

I said, "Well, do you know what you're going to do? Who is your best friend at city hall?"

He said, "Oh, General Townsend."

I said, "Well, General Townsend's my best friend. And he is the best city manager in the South. But let me tell you what's going to happen." I said, "I'm not a lawyer, but I know that we operate under the city manager form of government. We as a council cannot fire Medford. That has to be done by the city manager. And when you tell General Townsend that he's got to fire Mr. Medford, then Mr. Townsend, General Townsend says, 'Gentlemen, you have my resignation. I'll not do it.'"

And they said, "Well, we've got somebody to take his place."

And I said, "Oh gracious, I can't believe I'm hearing what I'm hearing." But I said, "I made a statement a minute ago. I said not tonight, not tomorrow, not next month. I will not go along with it, and I'll fight you on it." And I did. And finally they--Dr. Hampton switched back over on my side, we had the four votes, so we killed that maneuver.

But that was the most unpleasant thing that I had to confront, me as a councilman. But that, that's in the personalities, and personalities always is distasteful. [It] was not done on his integrity, or his ability, his honesty--that wasn't involved. It was just a matter of he didn't do what the mayor wanted done, so the mayor wanted to get rid of him. But that was, as I said in the beginning, that's the worst confrontation that I had. I don't like to get into personalities.

WL: Let's go back again to--or go forward I guess--to the 1960s. There were just a couple things that I think we could use a little bit more detail on. If you have additional recollections, it would be useful. Beginning with the Woolworth's demonstrations--the Woolworth's sit-ins in February 1960--what were the reactions downtown in Greensboro, business community, to what was going on in Woolworth's there in February 1960? Is it fear, anxiety or--?

BM: I think you could say fear, anxiety, doubt, question-- what's next, what are we going to do. I don't, I don't think that there was much of an answer that anybody had, what was going to come. Woolworth's is still in business, and it's really the only one. Kress' is gone. S&W Cafeteria is gone. The Marriott is gone. Mayfair Cafeteria is gone. Belk's is gone. Thalheimer's is gone. Meyer's Department Store is gone. Multi-million dollar companies.

S&W has lost all nineteen of their cafeterias, for what reason I don't know. But they told me that they were losing a hundred thousand a year, even after I left downtown Greensboro with the Mayfair. After I left it, they told me that they were losing a hundred thousand a year, and that they would rather pay the rent on the building, which was--they said was eighty-six thousand a year rent--they'd rather pay that for the remainder of the lease than to sit there and operate and lose a hundred thousand dollars. They'd be better off to turn the key in the door. And they did. And then Caesar Cone, who owned the S&W Cafeteria, several years later, after they quit the business, they tore the building down. It's a parking lot now. Back of Belk's, or what was Belk's Department store.

But S&W Cafeteria was the finest cafeteria in America. It was--not my opinion--it was acknowledged to be the finest in the nation. It was a three line cafeteria, operated on three floors. It had a--are you old enough to know what a Rube Goldberg drawing is? It's where everything goes really caddywhompus.

WL: Right.

BM: But they had subveyors and conveyors that took the dishes from the basement to the first, second floor, to the third floor kitchen. They brought them back down, and through a crisscross of conveyors and subveyors, they would pick those dishes off of trays that were coming down and carry them from the third floor down to the basement, to the dish department. They'd be cleaned and send them back up to the departments where they would be used. It was a fantastic operation and absolutely gorgeous, and one of the most expensive cafeteria buildings in the country. And [it's] just sort of unbelievable that they would phase out, fold up. But the whole--

WL: Was this the flagship?

BM: It was the--well, it was one of their later models of their cafeteria. They had nineteen in the, in the southeast here--Charlotte, Raleigh, Washington, D.C., Newport News--

WL: Asheville had one.

BM: Asheville.

WL: [unclear].

BM: Yeah, they were. And Mister--I wrote a letter to one of the trade magazines commending Mr. Sherrill on being eighty-five years old and putting in a cafeteria in Asheville. That--a carousel counter, if you ate there a carousel counter brought the brought the food around. You stood there and brought the food around to you.

WL: That's right. That's the one that was downtown.

BM: That was in the shopping center.

WL: Oh, the one at--

BM: The shopping center.

WL: Oh, yeah, right. Okay.

BM: And it was just marvelous. But that, again, was some of the forward thinking that he did down at the cafeteria here. But they phased out. And I don't know, I don't know what was the end reason for their losing nineteen places. But they--of course Mr. Sherrill is gone now. He died, lived to be ninety-six. But he was a good friend of mine. But not good enough to stay out of Greensboro. I say that tongue in cheek.

WL: Was the much-heralded decline of downtown Greensboro--did that have any relationship to the troubles in the early sixties, do you think?

BM: Oh, there's no question. The two things--the people were scared to come downtown, and then the shopping centers came in and it was a springboard. It certainly helped the shopping centers tremendously to have the fear of people coming downtown. They just moved right on in with the nice shopping centers, like Friendly shopping center, and Four Seasons, and later on Carolina Circle mall, and then all the strip centers--High Point Road, Battleground Road. Quaker Village was on the upswing at that time, too. And there were--very definitely the integration situation helped defeat downtown business. But again, I would in fairness say that the exodus to the countryside was a big factor, too. The combination was--

WL: Right, the suburbs. Of course, people don't live as close to downtown as they used to.

- BM: Right, right. And the businesses began to move out, like J.P. Stevens and Pilot Life Insurance Company on High Point Road. And they begin to move on out, Unifi, so many of the big companies moved away. Bur-Mill, Burlington Industries, they moved on out on Friendly Road. So, all of that combined to pull the plug on downtown Greensboro.
- WL: Looking back over the last twenty or thirty years, how would you characterize race relations now, say, as opposed to 1963? Do you think it's better now, or worse, or in between?
- BM: Well, I'd like to think that they're better. I think that there are those who still wave red flags that everything that's done is done on a racial basis, which I don't buy. I think you look at the record and see what has happened and the gains that have been made, and if you wouldn't--where the Reverend--school board--
- WL: King. Michael King.
- BM: King, Michael King was defeated [for city councilman], he defeated himself. Alma Davis--Alma--
- WL: Alma Adams?
- BM: Adams--Alma Adams. I think they defeated themselves. I know Rev. King personally, but you cannot be militant and find fault and throw cold water on everything that's done on a black and white basis. It's going to spill back on you. And I think it--and then, when it's all done, Dr. [George] Simkins comes with headlines in the paper that the white people defeated Rev. King. Well, I don't for one minute believe that. I think that the Rev. King, he did things that defeated himself. And any other person that runs for office, and they continue to be negative, negative, negative--they are going to defeat themselves. History has proven that, black or white. If black people are--have the responsibility and have the know-how, they're going to be--they will be elected to office, and they will serve well. Katie Dorsett has done extremely well, and she is a good citizen. Justice [Henry] Frye, grand person, and he's one--the first black justice of the Supreme Court.
- WL: Sure, that's right.
- BM: A Greensboro man. I know him, know him well. But, but every time something happens--say, "Well, it wouldn't have happened. The only reason it happened is because he's black." I don't buy that. I don't buy that. I think that if they have that responsibility and the know-how that they can go anywhere. It's done in sports. It's done in national politics, if they've got the know-how. Look at all the governors of states. The mayor,

Mayor [Harold] Washington [of Chicago], Mayor [Harvey] Gantt in Charlotte. There was one--Mayor [Howard] Lee, down in Chapel Hill. They've got--they're smart and they--I don't know, they're smarter than I am. I couldn't do some of the things they do.

WL: Sure.

BM: I mean the knowledge part of it. I am not smart as they are. I am not technically trained at some of the things that they're trained in. And they're gifted speakers. My hat's off to them. Dr. Hampton was a gifted person. And that--I think if they could forget the color and just say, "This is the way it is," I think we would go forward ninety miles an hour.

WL: Well, I thank you very much for the interview. We can conclude unless you think we need to--

BM: I've enjoyed it.

[End of Interview]