

UNCG CENTENNIAL ORAL HISTORY PROJECT COLLECTION

INTERVIEWEE: Lenoir C. Wright

INTERVIEWER: Anne R. Phillips

DATE: February 9, 1990

[Begin Side A]

AP: This is Anne Phillips and today is February 9, 1990. I'm here with Dr. Lenoir Wright, retired, of the UNCG [The University of North Carolina at Greensboro] history department. Introduce yourself and we will test this machine. Just say something.

LW: Well, it's been a nice day all day, hasn't it.

AP: Yes, it's lovely. We're having springtime. [recording paused] Tell me, Dr. Wright, about your background, about your growing up, and your family.

LW: I grew up in Charlotte, North Carolina. My father was a general practitioner, a doctor. And I went through the local school system. And I went to Chapel Hill when it was a lovely small village, people really wanted to retire to. Now they retire, they have to go to live halfway between Chapel Hill and Durham, or someplace like that. And then I spent two years in England at Oxford University, where I read jurisprudence. And I went to Harvard Law School, and I practiced law for a couple years just before World War II. [Editor's note: World War II was a global conflict fought between 1939 and 1945.] But I wasn't a good lawyer, and I didn't enjoy it. And the one good thing that came out of the war, as far as I was concerned—personally, was that I decided not to go back into the law. And luckily, the GI Bill of Rights came along, and I went to Columbia University. I had gotten interested in Far East, having spent the last year of the war in Okinawa. And so I went to Columbia, and I got my doctorate there. Then lucky enough to—I got married, and I got a job at Woman's College [of the University of North Carolina, now UNCG] in 1950. [Editor's note: Dr. Wright came to Woman's College in 1953.]

AP: I see. In 1950 [1953]. What prompted you to think about North Carolina, or to consider returning?

LW: Well, of course I was delighted to come back to North Carolina, but it was the job offer. Having gotten married, I needed a job.

AP: You needed a job.

LW: So I came back to North Carolina, came back to Woman's College, and I've been here ever since.

AP: And your concentration of study at Columbia was in what? Your field of concentration, your study there?

LW: Well, it was generally in international affairs, but with an emphasis on the Far East.

AP: So you came here in 1950 [1953]. And what was the campus like when you got here?

LW: Well, I'll tell you, I had taught at Fordham University—a part-time job—and I taught American government, and when I came, I landed in a terrible—I didn't—I was naive. One reason I didn't like law was it was so contentious, and so, I don't know, it was—

Well, anyway, I thought university life, college life would be a wonderful change. So I landed in the middle of this terrible fight between president Graham and some elements of the faculty. [Editor's note: Dr. Edward Kidder Graham, Jr.'s title was chancellor.]

AP: I see.

LW: And I had known the chancellor—he was president then—at Chapel Hill, and I looked forward to seeing him. And I don't know, it was not a very—I never knew from one year to the next for about four years whether I would be rehired.

AP: I see.

LW: But finally he was forced to resign.

AP: Yes.

LW: And at first, I was sympathetic to his point of view, instead of his fight. The thing that started the fight was that he wanted to have a general course—introductory course—which now we have. [laughs]

AP: I see.

LW: And people fought that, including a lot of people in the history department whom I will not name. Anyway, I finally got settled in, and I had a wonderful year of post-graduate work in Ann Arbor, Michigan. And I went there for the purpose of trying to set up a course at UNCG in Asian civilization. And of course, they had a lot of big shots—they had a program there and had a lot of big shots, and I was there in their program and had some difficulties, because there was one person who was the organizer, and he had to organize all of these big shots, and that was a terrible point of view. But for the students who didn't know these difficulties, it was a wonderful course, and I sat in on that course as well as a lot of other courses.

I remember sitting in on an advanced seminar course in Japanese history, and I sat in the back of the room next to a young man, and I asked him, "What is your interest in Japanese history?" And he said, "I'm interested in the Tokugawa shogunate," which is a period in Japanese history. [I said] "As a matter of fact, I'm interested in the first ten years." And he looked at me, and I was even then with some gray hair, and he said, "What are you doing? What is your interest?" And I said, "I'm interested in Asia." And I could see him withdrawing. [laughs] Anyway, I got a grant to go to India, and I spent a Fulbright year in Iraq—in Baghdad. All of which was very, very interesting.

AP: What year was that, in the Fulbright time? About what period?

LW: The Fulbright was—both were Fulbrights. One—Oh, I guess I was brought to teach a course in the Middle East, and I also taught four—three other courses in European history—which was a novelty for me. [laughs] You know, I'm not making this very coherent, but these things occur to me, that I don't I ever taught as good courses as the first year I taught. I was really enthusiastic and knowledgeable, and I really gave a lot. And I think that's true of everybody who teaches. The first year they teach a course, they're worried and they—

But anyway, the Fulbright to Iraq came in the '50s. And in the '60s I went to India on a Fulbright. But I also went again to India, and indeed I taught Middle East, India and Pakistan, China and Japan. I was indeed the Asian expert, or maybe specialist is a better word.

AP: Yes, it's quite a tall order.

LW: But—and I taught the course in Asian civilizations—which was India, China and Japan—and it was a wonderful experience for me, because I became interested in Buddhism, and to trace Buddhism, we started in India, into China and then into Japan. It was very, very nice for me. I went to—In contrast to what went on at Ann Arbor, where there were a lot of experts brought together to teach their individual specialties, I taught the whole thing, but while it lacked the depth that those people had, it went a lot smoother because I ran it and I taught it. [laughs]

AP: Had control over that.

LW: Yes.

AP: Well, what about the students? You know, what about some of the students that you had in some of those classes you know?

LW: As I say, I went to Japan. I ended up going to Japan about eight times. I went to India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and all around, I was just circling China—China was not open to Americans. The students, I loved the students. It was then Woman's College, and I thought some of the students were occupying a seat, but there were a lot of them who were very interested and it was a pleasure. A real pleasure. And when I retired, the thing

that I missed was teaching the students. I did not miss the growing administration, and committees, and all of this.

AP: The classroom work was always very important for you?

LW: Oh, I want to say something about that. When I came, there were three classes of teachers: there were those teachers who were old and who, I'm sorry to say, leaned on what they had learned and weren't very adventuresome. Then there were those who—some of them were good teachers—there were those who were active in pursuit of their specialties, and I had a lot of them, and kept up and did some writing, and then there were a very selective group of, like Richard N. Current [history professor], who were very important researchers. And now I would say there are sort of two classes of people—those who are teaching and doing some work but not very great at research, and the researchers. And unfortunately those who are not researchers are being squeezed out. And in some ways, I think this is a shame because, you know, I think we do most of our work on the collegiate level, not on the university level. We're not a great graduate faculty. And I think while emphasis on research is inevitable as this place grows in size and importance, I probably couldn't get a job now if I came back because I had not engaged in basic research—that was not my preoccupation.

AP: So the classroom was always very important for you and for many other faculty?

LW: I don't mean that some of the researchers are not good teachers.

AP: Yes, I understand.

LW: Dr. [Richard] Bardolph [history professor] and Dr. [Allen] Trelease [history professor], and certainly Dr. Current, were just great teachers as well, but I think—We had John Kenneth Galbraith [Canadian and, later, American economist, public official, and diplomat], come down, he'd just come back to give some lectures, and he'd just come back from being ambassador to India.

And I asked him, I think he was at Harvard, I said, "How are you making adjustment at Harvard [University] after being ambassador?"

And he said, "Oh, I do all right. In fact, I only teach one course—twelve o'clock on Wednesday." [laughs] And that's what I wouldn't like to see happen, because I think the students are the heart of a university, and certainly of a college. And they ought to be taught by the finest people academically in the faculty. How can you combine those and get producing scholars is what I'm a little worried about?

AP: That's sometimes difficult to get all of that.

LW: Because ambitious scholars have to spend an awful lot of time in research, and I suppose what they would like to do would be to able to teach seminars where the graduate students do a lot of the research for their research. [laughs] You know, I'm not belittling the process, and one should be a research scholar, but "in media virtu tum es."

AP: Yes, I understand your point, what you're saying. Yes, that's a difficult question in academic life.

LW: And certainly the university shouldn't be in the clutches of the administration.

AP: Speaking of administration, you know, when you came, you said you were wanting a little bit more of—

LW: I talked to the chancellor, but since we have grown in size, inevitably there are vice-chancellors, assistants to vice-chancellors, assistants to them—And you know to get through to talk to the chancellor, you have to go through these various levels. And I'm not sure that's a good thing at all. I don't think bigness necessarily makes for betterness. Do you?

AP: No, I don't. I don't. And I think that we have to wrestle with that question, we should wrestle with that question in American academic life.

LW: Now, Harvard and Yale [University] have broken down into small, sort of, colleges—much on the Oxford system, where the big university doesn't play a very important role. They are the umbrella. You're a member of a college, and you do your work in the college. And you do take lectures—And there are university lecturers, and Harvard houses, essentially, little college units, smaller units.

AP: That does make a difference in the whole university.

LW: And a lot of students are lost when they come to a big university, and their experience is hampered, I think. By the time that they finally get settled and learn their way around they're two years gone.

AP: And there isn't enough perhaps interaction with faculty, you are suggesting? I mean, bigness means we have lost that connection—teacher and student. Very often.

LW: Yes, and the teacher-student ratio has got to be kept small.

AP: Yes. When you came here, what about the total number, how many students, about, in the '50s?

LW: There were something like two to three thousand. There weren't a lot, but they were in an ideal situation.

AP: Were most of the young women from North Carolina?

LW: Yes, yes, they were.

AP: A large percentage?

LW: A large percentage were. And more and more, people are coming from the outside. I think some are attracted by the quality, but a lot of them are attracted by the cost.

AP: Yes, it is less expensive.

LW: And I must say the foreign—outside students have added a cosmopolitan quality to the university.

AP: When you came here, you were saying it was a time of controversy. How did that controversy manifest itself most, would you say? What were the major types of conflict?

LW: Well, Edward Graham, who was appointed the—I forget, was he president or chancellor—anyway, let's call him the president. He had been educated at Cornell [University], and he had an idea that the education of the freshmen could be greatly improved by having this course, which was an interdisciplinary course. And a lot of the faculty, and particularly the history department, were opposed to that. The history department and the English department really sort of ran the university. They were important; they had good faculties. And this diminished the control mechanism that the history department had, if they had to rely upon outsiders—you know, interdisciplinary—and that's where it started. And then it became—got on a personal level, and the president began drink a lot and he was ultimately relieved.

AP: I see.

LW: And I thought, in a sense, he got a raw deal, but I personally was his friend and in a sense brought in by him. But I veered away from him ultimately, and I couldn't satisfy neither one of the two. And they were very vicious, very vicious. As I say, I was caught right in the middle of that controversy, but ultimately that was resolved, and as I say, we now have a strong interdisciplinary—But it's funny how departments are very concerned about keeping their quota of students because the quota of faculty depends on the quota of students. And you see that operating on.

AP: So it must have been—it was a difficult time, difficult personally and professionally, somewhat in those times. And I would guess that it was difficult for many people on the faculty.

LW: Oh, yes it was.

AP: Well, I don't know about tempers, whether tempers flared.

LW: Oh yes, there were riotous faculty meetings.

AP: I see.

LW: And I will not go into the merits and demerits, but I'll just say it was a terrible time. And it was costly, I think. It left a scar, took a lot of years; a lot of people had to retire before

that finally got settled. But I since I had been in a framework at Columbia [University] of international politics.

When [Otis] Singletary came as the president, he made two innovations: one was the honors courses, which I thought were wonderful thing. You know about those?
[Editor's note: Dr. Singetary's title was chancellor.]

AP: Yes.

LW: And then he called me in, and he said, "You're going to head the International Studies Program."

AP: Oh, I see. What did you think at that point?

LW: Well, I said, "Okay, sure, I'll be glad to." And that was a problem of integrating various departments, and there were department who resented that, too, because they felt the program took away their students, but it was not designed that way. There remained people who were, let's say, geography majors, and then this was superimposed upon— They got a degree in geography, for instance, or history, and plus an international studies certificate. Well, I rather hesitate to say this, but I will say it, subsequent administrations have not supported an international studies program. It has been a—often had no money. And [James C.] "Jim" Cooley, whom you know in the department, took over when I retired, and that was one of the things he was head of. And I think the administration gave little verbal support and practically no monetary support.

AP: That's difficult, yes.

LW: And you know, I think it would have widened the horizons of people. We're, as Americans, we don't know anything about our neighbors; we don't even know where our neighbors are. [laughs] I'm sure you've seen the geography failures.

AP: Much less the language or the culture—

LW: And this program was designed to be tied into an overseas experience. And we never got that off the ground.

AP: I wonder how one could account for that, the fact that—

LW: I don't know, just—there were a lot of other concerns, and the I guess the university never had enough money to go around. And they're experiencing another period of a lack of money. And we never were able to get a major grant. So I don't know. Towards the end of my career, there was the Women's Studies movement. I don't know, but from what I've heard, I don't think that that really got off the ground. Maybe Jean Gordon [history and political science professor] could tell you more about that. I don't know.

AP: About what year would that Women's Studies—some of those ideas have come up, for Women's Studies?

- LW: I would say in the late '60s. Dr. Roy Schantz [history professor] was appointed to direct it. And they had a core of courses much like the International Studies Program.
- AP: Those programs do take not only interest, but money, from the administration.
- LW: And support. Strong support. And it would never have gotten off the ground if Dr. Singletary, who was the president or chancellor, had not supported it. But he left shortly thereafter; I think he went to Kentucky or someplace like that.
- AP: I see. What was his interest, do you believe in starting international studies and wanting that sort of program?
- LW: Well, I guess he just thought that the university, like a lot of other Southern institutions, was a little short on the international outlook.
- AP: A bit provincial? As a North Carolinian, I can say that with love and respect. [both chuckle]
- LW: I feel exactly the same way. I don't know. Smaller institutions, like Guilford [College], have a very extensive program of overseas study, and they send people every year abroad to study. But they're of a different complexion. I think I mentioned to you earlier about the involvement of men on the campus.
- AP: Yes. Tell me how you perceived that. Well, tell me about some of the controversy, because surely there was some.
- LW: There was relatively little. We were not—We were actually told that it was going to happen, and then we were told a few days later that it had happened. We didn't have a debate on the matter. I think I was one of the few who really got upset about it, because I thought that we had a very fine Woman's College—that was its name—of course its name was going to be changed. The greater university, the people in Chapel Hill, you know, in the beginning there were three units, important units: [University of North Carolina at] Chapel Hill, [North Carolina] State [University], and Woman's College. And Woman's College, in the beginning which was the [State] Normal [and Industrial] School in the beginning, was allocated functions like home economics, things that were regarded as appropriate for young ladies—physical education and teaching, those were the three things.
- And gradually I felt that the undergraduate program at the Woman's College was superior. You could get a superior education than you could at Chapel Hill or State for the reason that we weren't so big. And you weren't taught by graduate students, you were taught by the best there were in the department. Everybody taught—Bardolph and Current and Trelease, all the rest of them, taught the beginning history courses. And so did everybody else. So I was sort of opposed; I didn't know what we could expect from this. And in the first years, I'm afraid we got the dregs, people who couldn't get in anywhere else, lived nearby and could commute. There were a lot of commuters—nothing against being a commuter, you understand.

AP: No, but that was a major change for Woman's College.

LW: Oh, that was a major change. We became The University of North Carolina at Greensboro. And, as did a lot of other, including some non-colleges—they became colleges and gradually became units, so how many units are there?

AP: Sixteen, I think.

LW: Yes. That makes the pie difficult to slice. Whereas we were number three—we were in the big three—we began to have to compete with [University of North Carolina at] Charlotte and East Carolina [University] and [University of North Carolina at] Asheville and all these places. And in many cases I'm afraid we were being squeezed out. But there was the other problem of what the influx of boys would do, of men would do. And I was apprehensive about that. And I think, you know, one thing that I like was that the women who came to the Woman's College, they ran their affairs. They learned from those extracurricular activities.

AP: They were in charge.

LW: They were in charge. Now, as I suspected, the boys have taken over. They run things, for the most part. I don't mean to say that the girls don't—the women don't play some role. And I think, contrary to my expectations, there's been some good that's come of it. The atmosphere is much more serious regarding politics, and to the extent that international affairs is considered, they have taken a lead in that, but not the only lead.

AP: Yes. So there were some good factors, good results?

LW: Yes. But here we go and getting into big-time sports, you know, and that really worries me.

AP: I regret that yes, very much.

LW: And I guess one of the problems that the chancellor has to deal with is the Chamber of Commerce, and they want big-time sports because of the money it will bring to the city. [laughs] Not what good it will do to the university, but what money it will bring. Well, and that costs money, and that siphons off money from academics. And you have the problem that, everywhere, of what to do with these semi-professionals. I thank God I didn't have to face that. You know, you can't blame them in a way; they have to spend all this time practicing, say, until six o'clock at night, and they're so tired they can't study. And a lot of them have been passed through the high school system without getting sufficient grades.

AP: I'm afraid so.

LW: You know, all of that. It's not their fault, but it is a system that condones this thing that worries me.

- AP: So that was a major change when UNCG—well, the college became co-ed. It took on a different complexion.
- LW: Yes, yes. Well, the big one is when you take on football. Fortunately, it'll be a long time before they take on football. Basketball's a big-time sport.
- AP: Well, you say that when someone made the decision for the school to be co-ed—
- LW: Well, let's face it, the whole country was going co-ed. There are only a few women's colleges: Vassar [College] and [Mount] Holyoke [College], there are only a few. And women nowadays don't want to go to a segregated—Even though I feel they can get a better education that way. It isn't as if they were circumscribed in their family, you know, they have plenty of contact with boys; they don't need campus contact with boys.
- AP: They can use that time for studying and concentrating on scholarly pursuits—
- LW: I concede that the maturity of a student is not entirely through the studies. It is the contact with their peers and contact with boys, in the case of women, men in case of—and that is part of growing up. But it does carry with it a heavy load, don't you think?
- AP: Yes, I do. It does change the whole idea of scholarship. I think, you know, especially for women who may not have the chances for leadership, as you're suggesting, except in an all-woman's institution. That is a difference, I think.
- LW: I think that's a big difference. And in classes, I noticed that it is boys who raise their hands, and the girls, well, you know. Maybe it's an old, old, old—maybe it's outdated, that boys are afraid of women they see as too smart. It's a ridiculous thing. And a lot of them have to appear to be dumb.
- AP: I think even with the influence of the Women's Movement that some of that feeling still is pervasive in our society, and in college classrooms—where young women and men are together, that women do still defer, although they know perhaps that they shouldn't. I think some of that does exist.
- LW: But they're also propelled by their women peers. Isn't it awful, that all of these things are so intertwined. I loved my life at the university. I certainly cannot think of a better life that I could have had.
- AP: So it was very fulfilling, extremely fulfilling, and a good combination of classroom work and your own study of international interests and travel, which made your classrooms different, and just the nature of your work.
- LW: Well, I thought because I was teaching—I had one strong feeling about the teaching of Asian courses, and that was the culture was so different from ours that it was very difficult to understand, and therefore I felt I had to spend a lot of time understanding them myself. So I spent a lot of time visiting these places. And I also felt that you

couldn't understand, particularly the traditional culture, unless you understood their religion and their arts, and they were all combined. It was just like the medieval period in European history, where art was religious art and music was religious music—it was pretty the same with—Although there was still a separateness that wasn't quite as engulfing as the Roman Catholic Church, had the control mechanisms. But since I've retired I've become very interested in music. And I spent a lot of time in the School of Music taking courses.

AP: That's interesting, that's good.

LW: Auditing courses—I don't take anything for credit. [laughs] I've had too many exams in my life.

AP: It was good for you, probably very good for them also. More instrumental, or just—

LW: No, I'm sorry, I don't play. But I hope in my next life that will come back playing cello or piano or speaking seventeen different languages.

AP: [laughs] You can do all that without practicing, without having to practice.

LW: I'm afraid my karma, because my present life has been so bad, that I'll come back a dog—not even a cat. I'm a cat lover. [laughs]

AP: Well, yes, that's interesting to speculate about. How did the students think—begin to think about International Studies? I'm thinking of the young women you had, and then did you have men in your classes? How did they—what was their world view I'm asking, or what world view did you help them have?

LW: They had a limited world view to start with, but I hope that their view was enriched. And a number of them, count them on my fingers, have had careers in the State Department, and overseas. One vital thing that I think happened, that happened under the Kennedy Administration, was the Peace Corps, and that was a way that younger people could get some exposure at no cost to themselves. And without having had a major background of expertise. I don't know whether we're feeling yet the impact of that, but the graduates of those, the alumni of those programs must each expand their concentric circle of influence. I hope it's happening.

AP: Yes, me too. I wonder sometimes about students today and whether—I do wonder about the world view, and I wonder how students of the '80s or 1990s have changed, or whether they are as progressive as students of the '60s. What do you think?

LW: I think there's been a change, but there are still a lot of pockets of insular feeling. The South is one bastion of that. They can't feel that what is happening so excitingly in Eastern Europe can affect them. And there are even people in the North and the West and the Middle West, I'm sure, who are feeling this. Even though, you know, we've got so much more than anybody else, materially, maybe they feel that they're insulated from the

outside, that we're a little island. As the economy erodes, I think this feeling's going to be even stronger. God forbid it should erode.

AP: Well, tell me more about the faculty when you were here. You've talked about English and history as being strong departments, and some changes, perhaps into the '60s—

LW: Well, first it was sociology that grew in strength, and a lot of people drifted over to them and majors, and that was exciting for them. And now of course it's accounting and business education that draws them. But I was happy to learn that the enrollment in the history department had increased. A lot of that enrollment is the interdisciplinary course that all of the history people teach. And I gather that's been very interesting for a lot of them. I haven't talked to anyone who didn't find it interesting.

AP: I think it would be enriching for faculty and students, and for the whole school.

LW: It depends on getting the right mix. If you don't get along, if you don't enjoy teaching with the other person, or persons—I don't know how many there are, three?

AP: Oh—yes. I'm not sure how that's set up, really. I mean, I'm more in history. But yes, I think it's fairly small.

LW: It's a small number. And they work out the outline that they want to have [unclear].

AP: Was that part of the Residential College movement, Dr. Warren Ashby's work [philosophy professor]? And Dr. [Eugene] Pfaff's work [history professor]? How did that figure in the whole—?

LW: No—

[End Side A—Begin Side B]

LW: Because they had foreign students.

AP: I see. So that became—the Residential College became tied in with the International Studies Program.

LW: Somewhat, somewhat. Not officially.

AP: Yes, and I know that Dr. Ashby—was he one of leaders—the founders of that idea?

LW: Yes, he was.

AP: And Dr. Gene Pfaff?

- LW: Yes, he was a really fine man. He was the head of the religion department, religious studies, and then he got into this. He had a fine mind, a very outreaching mind.
- AP: Tell me about—I know he was quite active in civil rights here in Greensboro and perhaps did a good bit not only to bridge town and gown elements, but racial groups, to bridge those barriers—Dr. Ashby and Dr. Pfaff, too. How did you see the Civil Rights Movement here in Greensboro and on this campus?
- LW: We only had a brush of that effect on our campus. The city as a whole—of course people were involved because of the Woolworth thing, we've never had a very big group of blacks in the student body or in the faculty. The faculty has been criticized because we haven't had more, but I can tell you that the faculty has tried. And it hasn't been that they're objecting, they've tried very strenuously to get—Let's face it, Harvard and Yale and Princeton are trying hard to get competent blacks on their faculty. Naturally, the competent blacks want to go to those institutions, and so that's been a problem.
- AP: Well, at the time of the [Greensboro] Sit-ins, did some of the young women here from campus participate? You know, how strong was that feeling for them to join with A&T [North Carolina Agricultural & Technical State University] students or Bennett [College] students? Do you think or do you know?
- LW: I don't know much about it, and I don't think there was a strong—The student body was pretty conservative. I don't mean that they were opposed to it, but active participation, on an active participation level—
- AP: Yes, that would have been—not really beyond the pale, but something they would not have done naturally perhaps to have been actively involved in the civil rights struggle, sit-ins, or even walks through the streets, demonstrations, even if a peaceful walk, it simply would have been a bit foreign to their lives and experiences.
- LW: The majority of the women students are from rural North Carolina, nothing against rural North Carolina—it's a wonderful institution.
- AP: I know, but it makes a particular—
- LW: It does put you in a sort of mold.
- AP: It may, yes, cause a particular sort of mindset. And though I hope that's breaking down in North Carolina, it may take a while. Do you think? It may take a while.

[End of Interview]