

UNCG CENTENNIAL ORAL HISTORY PROJECT COLLECTION

INTERVIEWEE: Blackwell P. Robinson

INTERVIEWER: William Link

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BR: Well, I had been teaching for two years at High Point [North Carolina] College after I had gotten my PhD, and I was the only one that year that got a job at High Point College. It was awful; maybe I'd better not say that. But anyway, [W.] Whatley Pierson came over the third year I was there, and he was the acting chancellor here. Well, you know that I'm sure.

WL: Yes.

BR: When Eddie Graham [Chancellor Edward Kidder Graham Jr.] departed and he called me over and wanted me to teach a course in North Carolina history, which I did. It was three hours a week; one day a week for three hours. And so I was a visiting professor after a fashion for that year and then, thank goodness, he got me over here in a full-time job, and that was in '57 that I got the full-time job.

WL: Right.

BR: Well then, I reckon we had about three thousand girls. It was then, of course, the Woman's College [of the University of North Carolina]. Well, you know that.

WL: Sure.

BR: It was real nice. I enjoyed it. They were real cute and pretty and dressed like they should all that way back there. And one of the main things was Miss Katherine Taylor [Class of 1928, dean of women, dean of students, dean of student services, director of Elliott Hall]. Do you know about her?

WL: Sure.

BR: Well, she was dean of women and, by George, she was a martinet if you ever saw one in your life. They couldn't come out in front of a dorm in shorts to go to town. They had to have a hat and gloves in the beginning there. Oh, to go out of town it was a real to-do. They had to come by her office for her to approve their apparel. It was just something.

WL: She kept [unclear].

BR: Mereb Mossman [sociology and anthropology faculty, dean of instruction, dean of the College, dean of faculty, vice chancellor for academic affairs]. who was academic dean and she was wonderful, really. And so we got along fine, and then—I was teaching. The history department then was history and political science, and I taught North Carolina history and a little bit of US history, but mainly political science, state government and national government. And state government was sort of difficult to put over, but I did the best I could. But then, I've forgotten what year, they divided them into the history department and the—I can't remember the year, but anyway that happened and—

WL: Who were some of your colleagues in the history department when you first arrived?

BR: Who what?

WL: Who were some of your colleagues in the history department when you first arrived, some other people in the department?

BR: Well, I was talking to my wife about that this morning. The only two people that are still around when I got here was [Richard] Dick Bardolph—of course, he's retired—and Lenoir Wright, Len Wright. And of course, he's been retired from UNCG [The University of North Carolina at Greensboro] for years and that was all. From then on, there really were more women faculty, I think, than men at that time and—

WL: Who were some of the women that—?

BR: Well, Miss Magnhilde Gullander [history and political science faculty]. Gullander, oh boy, she was something. A typical college teacher, old maid—nice as she could be, but, Lord, she was a martinet too, they say. I never had a course under her, thank goodness. And then there was Betty—no; Lord, it's so long ago. Who else was there? Oh, Miss Largent, Vera Largent [history professor]; Frank Parker [history professor] was here. That's right, I left him out and, of course, he's retired but he's still here in Greensboro. The women. What other ones? Oh, I just forget after all these years.

WL: How would you characterize the faculty, generally, in the whole college—whole Woman's College?

BR: I thought the whole place was a lot better than when we were the Woman's College, and we stood out—a lot of people said, the best, certainly in the South—Woman's College. And then when we started getting males in and then it became integrated and all that, why everything else changed completely. I'm not condemning either, but they did make a big difference. I thought it was great to have just the prestige of having the one—I mean, the finest academic [coughs] setup of any school in the South for women and, well, that blew in[?] a little while. And then—oh, I don't know, we got so big, and it seems to me that the students all got worse and worse, I reckon, is the word for it. They just—you used to enjoy teaching, I did, a class, but then when all these others came on, when everything changed, I got really discouraged over the whole thing and wasn't very happy about it. So I retired when I was sixty-five rather than going on to seventy—and I tried to

think about some other people that taught when I first got here. John Beeler [history faculty]—that was before your day too, wasn't it?

WL: He was there one or two years and then retired.

BR: He died, I know, when we were in Europe—that was in '85.

WL: Yes.

BR: Just dropped dead and—

WL: He was here when you first came?

BR: What?

WL: He was here when you first came?

BR: Yes, yes.

WL: How about [Richard] Dick Current [history faculty], was he here?

BR: Oh, Lord, he was head of the department.

WL: Yes.

BR: For, I think, about three or four years—I've forgotten how much, and then he went to [University of] Wisconsin[-Madison], and I sure hated to see him leave because I thought he was great. And then he did come back, you know, after so long, I've forgotten how long, and taught and—

WL: Right. Was he a good department head?

BR: I thought he was fine, and he did something I liked. We had a history departmental luncheon every Thursday, I think. *De rigueur*, you had to be there, and I don't know, we got to know people a lot better. But of course, the history faculty was much smaller. Well, I didn't mean to leave out Dick Current, of all people.

WL: Did the fact that you had political science and history—did that, was there any division or did political science get along pretty well with history?

BR: Oh, yes—

WL: They eventually wanted to be on their own, I guess.

BR: Yes, yes, yes. Well, it makes sense. But I mean, there's no opposition on either side or anything else.

WL: Did the history faculty teach political science and political science faculty teach history? Was there kind of a crossover?

BR: I don't know; it's hard to say. We were mainly the history faculty, but attached to us was the political science, was political science. And Margaret Hunt [political science faculty] was one of the earlier—I know she was there when it did divide, when it split up. And David Olson [political science faculty] came later. Well, they went across the street in—what was the name of that building right by Curry?

WL: The Graham Building.

BR: Yes, yes. And so we hardly ever saw them.

WL: When you first arrived on campus, when you first came in 1957, '56-'57?

BR: Well, you know I was over here teaching that course. '57 is when I was full time. What were you going to ask me about?

WL: What I wanted to know is: the campus had gone through a rather bad period with Ed Graham.

BR: Oh, it had that.

WL: Was there any kind of aftermath that you came into?

BR: When I got here, the faculty was just split over that thing, and they would ask me what I thought about it. And I said, "I'm not going to open my mouth because I haven't been here long enough to know anything about it." Now I liked Ed Graham; he had been brought up by his aunt and uncle, Louis Graves [newspaper editor], down in Chapel Hill [North Carolina]. And I had liked him, you know, not as an administrator, but just as a person, and I just wasn't going to open my mouth one way or the other. And—

WL: But you had known Ed Graham already?

BR: Oh yes, since I was about that high, I reckon. He lived in Chapel Hill, and his mother and father were real good friends of my parents and with me, and it was almost like he was in the family. And, of course, he—you probably know that he saw a great deal of Katherine Taylor?

WL: Yes.

BR: Did you know that?

WL: I had heard that.

BR: Somebody said what got Ed Graham was old Taylor. He'd go around every afternoon about 5:00 [pm], and I'm sure I shouldn't be saying this, but I don't know, there it is and well—who else am I trying to think of?

WL: Was the—what do you think Graham's main mistake was? How did he—?

BR: What do I think what?

WL: Why was it that Graham—that Ed Graham lost out?

BR: I don't know. You see, it was before I was here, and I just got hearsay on the whole thing.

WL: But you knew there were deep divisions?

BR: I knew that he come in the faculty cafeteria, and he would say, he would sit down by somebody and say: "Well, I'm taking off my chancellor's hat here." I mean, things like that just rubbed you the wrong way. Somebody told me, I don't know.

WL: Did you think that was consistent with his personality, having known him before?

BR: Yes.

WL: Something you might have been used to perhaps?

BR: That's true. Well, I don't have a [unclear].

WL: You, did you have much to do with the new chancellor following Pierson, Gordon Blackwell? You must have known Gordon Blackwell,

BR: Oh yes, he came the year I came for full time. And he and Lib were the best friends we had, I reckon, for a long time. Well, he left after three years though. Yes, we were devoted to him, and I never understood why he picked up and left because I think he had a better job here, but he didn't ask me, so there it is.

WL: Was he a good chancellor, do you think?

BR: Yes, I do. Yes—and then after he was here three years, Whatley Pierson came back over for one year as acting chancellor again.

WL: Yes.

BR: And then is when they got, when we got [Chancellor] Otis Singletary. That's when I was on the committee to find him and, really, I'm the one that found him. What happened was Mary's brother, Manning Hudson, had been to school with Otis at Millsaps [College, Jackson, Mississippi] and somebody had said that he was an up-and-coming young man. So he also knew [Chancellor James S.] Jimmy Ferguson real well, my brother-in-law, and

so I asked the committee, “What about me calling my brother-in-law and seeing what he has to say about Otis?” And they said, “Fine.” So I did. But first of all, I got, I don’t know why, but somehow I did, I got Jimmy Ferguson first on the phone. Talked to him, he said “Yes, he’s very, very well qualified, and he’s certainly on the make.” Those were his words. So anyway, we invited him to come up here to look him over and he came, we looked him over and took him. And he brought with him Jimmy Ferguson, which is the best thing he ever did in his life, I think. Otis—and I liked Otis, too, but anyway that’s another story.

WL: How would you describe Otis Singletary?

BR: Oh, he was on the make, I’ll put it that way. He wasn’t going to stop here, and then, you know, he went up to Washington [DC] and stayed a good while and—he and Sargent Shriver [American statesman and activist, driving force behind the creation of the Peace Corps, founded the Job Corps, Head Start and other programs as the architect of President Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty and served as the United States Ambassador to France]. He was right under Striver, and people didn’t like that. I mean, he was chancellor in absentia for too long. And so anyway, he resigned or went away, of course, and who should step up but Jimmy Ferguson. And ballots were passed around, and he got—he did not get one dissenting vote. Everybody thought the world of Jimmy Ferguson and he was good; and from every walk of life in this university they liked Jimmy Ferguson and—

WL: When did you—you and Jim Ferguson go back a ways, don’t you? You’d known each other a long time?

BR: What?

WL: You and Jim Ferguson knew each other a long time, didn’t you?

BR: Oh Lord, yes.

WL: When did you first meet Jim Ferguson?

BR: Well, let’s see. Otis came in—wait a minute, I have to think back—in ’62. I’m not real sure.

WL: That’s right.

BR: Because it was three years with Gordon Blackwell and one more with Whatley, and then he came, and Jimmy Ferguson came at the same time. He brought him with him and well—that’s that and—

WL: Did you know him from [University of North Carolina at] Chapel Hill?

BR: Which?

WL: Jim Ferguson.

BR: No, I didn't. I know he was there.

WL: He was after you, I guess.

BR: Yes. He roomed—he had a room with Lonnie and Dewey—well, never mind, anyway. And I had met him back then, but I didn't really know him.

WL: How would you describe Jim Ferguson as a chancellor and as a person? As a—

BR: I would say that I don't think anybody could have done a better job than he did at UNCG. I really do, and I think the legislature realized his sincerity. I think he had as much sincerity as anybody I know, and you could feel it. Of course, one of his main jobs was getting the legislature to give money, and he managed to do it without just raising Cain about it all. He did it in a very subtle way, I think, and—well—

WL: Did you have much feeling about why coeducation took place?

BR: Why what?

WL: Once coeducation took place in 1963, was it a *fait accompli*?

BR: Yes, yes.

WL: Was it something that—how did the faculty feel about it, do you think?

BR: I'm not too sure about that. They were split, yes, and right at that very point in 1962 when all that was working up, I was running for [United States] Congress. And I was off for a year when most of that was happening and—but anyway, I got a leave of absence for a year, and that's another thing. Here I was at the history department, liberal as it could be, I stuck out like a sore thumb—Republican, and I knew about two or three on the whole campus that were Republicans or would admit it. One or two of them are still living. Boy, I really stuck out like a sore thumb.

WL: Did you feel as though you did? You felt—

BR: Well, I expected it. I didn't know some of them would be as liberal as they were. But they were.

WL: How did that affect your position on campus? Did that affect it? Did people respect it?

BR: How did it affect what?

WL: Did your colleagues respect your—your difference of opinion?

BR: Yes, most of them did, but someone like Jordan Kurland who was in the history department, he would not speak to me because I was Republican. That's true. And one time I was in the chancellor's office, on the outside waiting to get in. And Jordan came out, and Otis came out with him, and then he stopped everything and started talking to me. So Jordan then turned around and said something to me, the first time he'd ever spoken to me after I had said I was going to run for Congress. But I mean some of them were that narrow minded.

WL: But that was the exception rather than the rule? That wasn't typical?

BR: Yes, yes, it was. And I know when I ran for Congress, Dick—he even put my picture in the history office, which surprised me. I had no idea. He said, “Well, of course, we're going to do it.” The front door needs to be closed.

[recording paused]

Oh, when I decided to run for Congress, I had to get special dispensation from, first of all, from Otis. He said, “Blackwell, I've heard you're probably going to do this. What am I going to do?” I said, “I don't know, I think I've got the right to run if I want to.” He said, “Yes you do, but you better get in the car with me and come on over and let's talk to [President of the University of North Carolina System William] Bill Friday.” So we got in the car, and we got over and he said, “Of course, it's his right; it's his privilege, fine.” So he said, “But I better take it before my board.” I said, “All right.” So I had to come back another time to spend the day while they were arguing what they should do about me, whether I could be—you know, get leave of absence for a year and what about money and all that. But all that worked out all right, but I had to run a real campaign before I could—[chuckles]

WL: Run the other campaign? Did—tell me about the campaign? You ran in the—

BR: It was the Sixth Congressional District, and in year—I mean back then, it was Orange County, of course, it's Chapel Hill, Durham County, Alamance County, and Greensboro. And it was a full job, and I worked like the devil. I lost thirty pounds in the thing. I took—I carried rural Guilford, High Point, and carried almost Greensboro. Horace Kornegay [four-term Democratic congressman from North Carolina], though, was already in office, and I had to run against him. But the other candidates were all, of course, extremely liberal, particularly Orange County, and Durham was about as bad. Alamance doesn't do much either way or didn't then but—

WL: But you won the primary—or did you?

BR: Oh yes, I had a right hard primary. A man from Alamance County was running too, and his great-uncle had been governor of the state and all that, but I beat him all right.

WL: You mentioned Bill Friday. Was Bill Friday much of a presence on this campus? Did he—

BR: Oh yes, yes. You see, there were the three campuses then.

WL: Yes.

BR: And that's the way I liked it. Oh yes.

WL: It made it kind of intimate—made it kind of an intimate relationship among the three?

BR: Yes, yes, yes.

WL: So the president could be—could pay attention more to an individual campus?

BR: Yes, yes, yes. It made a big difference. It's made a big difference when we get all these offsprings [sic]. I don't think half of them, three-fourths of them, are not really—they don't deserve university status.

WL: Yes.

BR: Well, I think maybe UNC Charlotte is doing pretty well, and UNC Wilmington—I'm not sure about Wilmington, but the rest of them, they had no right to be a university. They don't have the libraries; they don't have the instruction—well, I could go on and on and on. I think it's ridiculous. If you put them all alone and treated them right, yes, but there's no reason to put them up with us. [chuckles]

WL: Do you think UNCG has slipped over the years in terms of—do you think they've lost out as a result of the expansion?

BR: Yes.

WL: You mentioned W.W. Pierson, Whatley W. Pierson [Editor's Note: William Whatley Pierson]? He came back after Gordon Blackwell left.

BR: For another year, yes.

WL: Sort of a caretaker administration?

BR: What?

WL: Did he have much to do?

BR: Oh yes, yes. He did a good job. See, he'd been dean of the Graduate School at Chapel Hill, I don't know how long.

WL: Yes.

BR: And oh yes, he was excellent. I don't know how he pulled this thing around, I don't know, but he did.

WL: And did his second term right before Singletary—?

BR: Yes.

WL: You think he also did a good job?

BR: Sure do. The funniest thing ever happened. When I went back to graduate school after World War II [1939-45 global conflict], I took my first course in summer school in political science, and it was under Whatley Pierson, and I was scared to death. I had been out of the university for a long time overseas, all of that, and I don't know what. Anyway, we had a mid-term exam and during the—right afterwards, he came in and said, "Is there a Mr. Robinson in the room?" I said, "Yes sir." He said, "Would you mind stepping down to my office?" I thought, "Oh, God, after all this, I've got a baby now, and all that. I'm going to be let loose, I'm sure." He said, "My wife, Mary Bynum, has said I had been very [unclear] and haven't invited you for dinner." So I was invited for dinner. His wife's father had been a great friend of my father's, down in Mt. Olive, North Carolina. And from then on we were great friends all the way around. Then finally Whatley—his wife took him down to Mt. Olive when he was virtually an invalid. Lord, I was even a pallbearer at his funeral and all. We were great friends.

WL: So you knew each other for a long time?

BR: What?

WL: You knew each other from that time that you were a student in his class?

BR: Oh yes, yes.

WL: When did you first start to notice big changes taking place in terms of the student body?

BR: When did I saw what?

WL: When did you first start noticing that things on campus were changing? You mentioned earlier that—

BR: It just seemed to happen all of a sudden. Well, you think just suddenly this women's college becomes coeducational, and then by the time we'd gotten that, we had become integrated. And I'm not opposing that at all, but it was a great change from what we had. And, I mean, in no way am I condemning that. I did this, though: I went and told some of the administration, "Don't send me any more of those students. I can't teach them anything." I was referring to black ones, and they were just impossible in the beginning, absolutely. But I got along fine with the rest.

WL: Difficult to teach? You found black students difficult to teach?

BR: Yes.

WL: For the most part, I guess, for a long time, even after UNCG became officially coed, it was still almost all women, wasn't it? Do I have that right? A few men?

BR: Yes, it was sort of a slow process, yes.

WL: Tell me about the places that you lived when you came—where did you first live when you came to Greensboro? Did you live near the campus?

BR: Where I first lived in Greensboro?

WL: In Greensboro when you came.

BR: Well, I had a house right across from Miss Largent on McIver Street. I lived there for six years, seven years, and then I found this—I was waiting for the house I wanted, and this house was ready for sale. So what happened was that I was on the board at Chapel Hill—at Holy Trinity [Church]. And when they discussed whether they were going to sell this or not, this was the rectory for Holy Trinity. And when they would discuss it, I'd go out of the room. And anyway, my wife says there is something wrong, a conflict of interest. Here is a vestryman voting for a house for his own. And, as I said, I left every time and—so I just lived those two places, on McIver Street and here.

WL: McIver Street. Was that a neighborhood that had a lot of faculty in it?

BR: Yes, and prostitutes.

WL: Oh really? [laughter]

BR: It was the strangest combination of anything. These dear old ladies, you know, most of them faculty, and then we'd have two or three houses just full of prostitutes.

WL: Which end of McIver Street was that? Was that down towards—?

BR: Well, McIver Street wasn't but one street.

WL: Yes.

BR: From Market [Street] on over to Tate [Street]—well, not Tate, that wasn't—Walker [Avenue].

WL: Walker?

BR: Walker, yes, and—

WL: All along, I guess, McIver was residences. The campus—

BR: On both sides.

WL: Houses, faculty houses and prostitutes, mainly?

BR: No. [chuckles]

WL: How did you see the history department changing over the years?

BR: How did I see the what?

WL: How did you see the history department as changing?

BR: More of the same.

WL: Yes.

BR: No—of course, in the last ten years, I don't really know what's happened.

WL: Right.

BR: I look at the list there, I don't even know them. Well, I don't know. You can't state an opinion when you don't know.

WL: Yes. Well, let's say about the time that you retired. Did you—

BR: I retired in '81.

WL: '81?

BR: Yes, I was 65.

WL: Had the department changed a lot by 1981?

BR: Oh yes, I think so.

WL: How?

BR: Talking about who else were here when I came. Charles Adams [1978 honorary degree, director of Jackson Library].

WL: Oh yes.

BR: He was the librarian for so long, and his wife Ellen. We were down out at the [Greensboro Historical] Museum Sunday for this thing for Edward R. Murrow [American

broadcast journalist], and he and they came. I do not—I admire him greatly; they're still going.

WL: When you retired—was it mainly a—what were the—why did you decide to retire?

BR: What was what?

WL: Why did you decide to retire in 1981?

BR: Well, I had taught twenty-five years. Mary had retired from Page High School [Greensboro, North Carolina], and she was thoroughly enjoying retirement, so I felt I might as well try it too. And actually I made more in retirement than I did teaching. So it wasn't a question of money either way. I mean it was just that I felt I had enough.

[End of Interview]