

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

INTERVIEWEE:     Hiram Hilty

INTERVIEWER:     Kathy Hoke

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[Begin Tape 1, Side A]

KATHY HOKE:       This is Dr. Hiram Hilty, retired of Guilford College history faculty. No?

HIRAM HILTY:       Actually, I was in foreign languages. I headed the foreign language department, taught Spanish and French.

KH:    But you had a history degree?

HH:    Yes. That was--well, I had a minor in Spanish Literature at Duke [University] [unclear].

KH:    It's always helpful at smaller institutions to have that breadth of knowledge. I'm about to go to High Point College, I've been offered a tenure track over there starting in the fall. They're quite pleased that I have a minor field in Russian History, even though I'm U.S.  
      Dr. Hilty, we're going to start with some basics, and then we'll get into the subject at hand. Tell me a little bit about yourself. Are you a native of Greensboro?

HH:    No, I'm a native of Iowa actually. I grew up in Missouri and came here by devious routes. I went to college in Ohio, graduate of Northwestern College in Ohio, and then Hartford Seminary in Hartford, Connecticut. And my wife and I went to Cuba for the board of missions of the Friends United Meeting and were there for five years. And then we came to Guilford in 1948. I was asked to teach Spanish, for which I had no formal training at the time but considerable proficiency. And then I studied at Duke, and [The University of North Carolina at] Chapel Hill, and the National University of Mexico. And then finally centered on a course of history from Duke, which I completed this side of middle life, actually.

KH:    Okay, very good. So you came to Greensboro, to North Carolina in effect, in the late 1940s then, is that right?

HH:    Yes, 1948.

KH:    Had you ever lived in the South before? Was that your first experience?

HH: Well, Missouri is a half and half state, so that there were Southern aspects to life there. As a matter of fact we had segregated schools. And there was a very tiny knot of black families in the town where I went to high school, and they had a separate school. Like everybody in the South, I accepted this as a part of life the way it was.

KH: Were there any differences that you noted between living in Greensboro as opposed to growing up and going to school in Missouri, in terms of race relations in particular?

HH: Well, I say Missouri was a compromised state, and this was reflected in every way in the state. The schools were segregated, but this was the only segregation that existed really. And the number of blacks was extremely small so that I never knew segregation in the way in which I found it here in North Carolina. For example, separate water fountains, separate restrooms, and that sort of thing was totally new for me. I hadn't [unclear] before.

And we came here from Cuba, where we'd been for five years, and the race situation there was very different from either place. There were many blacks in Cuba, particularly in eastern Cuba where we were. And I recall that one of the big surprises I had early in our experience there was to see a work crew, a building project, in which the foreman of the crew was a black man and most of the workmen were white.

KH: That would be unusual in the late forties in Greensboro, I imagine.

HH: At that time, unusual. So we came to understand the subtleties with race division [unclear]. It was not a totally integrated society. An interesting introduction in retrospect to living in North Carolina.

KH: Oh, really? How so?

HH: Well, as far as race relations were concerned. Similar proportion, perhaps, of blacks and whites in North Carolina, Greensboro, probably more here than Cuba. It's very different from the American race situation as it existed at that time. The blacks had a place in society, which in many ways was better than that of blacks in this country, and certainly different. There was considerable miscegenation in an informal sort of way. And we had first assumed that there were no distinctions at all, but later we found that this was not true. I remember, for example, that one of my wife's rules--we were young at this time--one of my wife's young friend came running over one day in tears, and the problem was that she had fallen in love with a young man and her parents wouldn't allow her to marry him because he had known black ancestors. He was a white man but he had some black blood. Her family was threatening to send her off to a convent.

KH: But apparently it must have been condoned at some level in society and by some people.

HH: Yes, these were middle-class people. On the lower levels it was much easier to marry.

KH: I have heard, or read actually, that in some parts of Latin America, one's social status related to race is not so much is there a drop of black blood, but how much black blood is there in the person. Did you pick up on that?

HH: Yes. Well, this is certainly true. And of course I learned a great deal about Latin America after we left Cuba, because Cuba was just a capsule within this larger whole. And I learned many things that weren't true that were in the books. [unclear] is what I discovered of Latin America.

But it is often true that social status makes a lot of difference in attitude toward race regardless of color, as you said, and economic status. And when you find honest Cubans, for example, they will often admit that maybe they had some African ancestors. They don't know because Cuba is an ancient country. The city where we were was a hundred years old before Plymouth Rock. And so going back that far, nobody knew for sure whether they had some black ancestors or not. Completely white people in appearance.

But one thing I observed, for example, was that quite often--there was a small Chinese minority in Cuba, and quite often a Chinese woman would marry a black man who happened to be making good wages. The economic aspect was strong enough to make her overlook the difference in race. Quite often they had a mix between Chinese and black for that reason.

KH: Money can be the great equalizer.

HH: That's right. [both laugh]

KH: So you came out of that environment and you came to Greensboro.

HH: Yes.

KH: And how would you characterize relations between the races in Greensboro, having come freshly from Cuba where there were some subtleties, as you say?

HH: Well, it was much more open and severe, shall we say, in Greensboro than in Cuba. It had to be much more of a, an affront to the black population in Greensboro than in Cuba.

KH: And you came at a time when there were still separate water fountains and so on.

HH: Yes.

KH: My understanding from reading and talking with people is that that tended to disappear somewhat by the 1950s.

HH: I'm not sure just when it disappeared, but I would connect it roughly with the civil rights period. Perhaps they were gone before then, but that's the way I think of it.

- KH: And in the context of race relations in Greensboro, then there was the Inter-Faculty Forum. Now that started in the late fifties, or did it start earlier or later? Dr. [Ben] Wilson [retired Guilford College faculty] was a bit vague about recollecting exactly when it started.
- HH: I'm vague. I was new to the city and to the colleges. I think of it as one of the earlier experiences I had here. I do recall being very nervous myself when I first came, trying to understand just what the rules were, because it was so different from anything I'd experienced before. So, you know, one's impulse to fraternize was sometimes inhibited by imagined as well as existing prohibitions. I had to sort of feel my way for a time.
- But college faculties tended to be well ahead of the general population. And the Guilford College faculty was pretty completely devoted to bringing down the bars of segregation by that time, although we were a segregated college. We didn't take black students until much later.
- KH: Do you see that, that dedication to bringing down the bars of color as being part of the Quaker heritage of Guilford, or would you attribute it to being what?
- HH: Well, it certainly was reinforced by the Quaker heritage, there's no question about that, although the feeling existed also on UNCG [The University of North Carolina at Greensboro] Greensboro campus.
- KH: How did you find out about the Inter-Faculty Forum? It seems to have been an unstructured group, fluid, just very free flowing. How did you get involved in it? Was there another faculty member who encouraged you to go?
- HH: The oldest memory I have is the meeting of a small group for lunch at the old YMCA [Young Men's Christian Association]. The YMCA was an instrument of integration at that time. And that was when the building was down on Market Street--well, it still is on Market Street, isn't it? The corner of Market and I can't remember the name of that street now. It's near the bridge where there's, at the railroad crossing. I think there may be some structure there now, it was vacant for a while. I can't now remember.
- KH: I can't remember which intersection. I'd know it if I drove past it.
- HH: There was an oblong brick building there at the time that had residence for disconnected males, for example, spend the night, or a week, or semester, and so forth, that sort of thing. And I remember meeting with a group of half a dozen in that place for lunch, and talking and getting together. That's the earliest memory I have, and I don't think the Inter-Faculty Forum existed at that time. It was something that grew out of informal groups of this sort, and perhaps that particular group. Again I don't really remember, because we would talk about when we would get together again, you know, we'd invite friends to join us. Maybe it grew out of that particular group. I really can't recall.
- KH: It's always interesting to me to learn why a certain group is founded. The--much of the activity of the Inter-faculty Forum seems to have been directed toward the civil rights

issue in Greensboro. But what makes a group decide to form and to keep meeting is of great interest to me. What was the purpose of the Inter-Faculty Forum before, say, 1960 and the sit-ins at Woolworth's?

HH: Well, first of all, it was, I suppose, the desire on the part of many of us to establish bridges between the races for ideological reasons. And also a matter of building bridges between the institutions. They were quite separate at that time; there needed to be more sharing between the colleges in Greensboro. And as the Inter-Faculty Forum grew, that in effect became I would say a more important function of the group. And that there were blacks in it was just something that had been assumed from the beginning as this group began to form.

KH: Okay. How about talking about the group in relation to what happened in Greensboro in the sixties. There, we have--the two events I'm particularly interested in are the sit-ins at Woolworth's, which involved two, several college students at A&T [North Carolina A&T State University] and attracted some participation amongst other students, and the demonstrations of 1963 downtown. What was the role of the Inter-Faculty Forum in those events?

HH: My judgment would be that there was no role in that.

KH: Was there a response on the part of the Forum? It must have been discussed.

HH: By that time there existed a group, a formally organized institution known as the Piedmont--I suddenly forgot the name of it now. It was a Piedmont fellowship, you must have found this in your searching, Ben Wilson, he should have mentioned it.

KH: Yeah, he did but I haven't transcribed his tape yet. [laughs]

HH: It was an organization which brought together the colleges of Greensboro and Wake Forest, and extended as far west as Lenoir-Rhyne I think, and the other direction, Elon College, maybe High Point College, and brought them together for, these were formal lectures and discussions that we had on matters of mutual interests, and they did not necessarily refer to race. And the meetings were held sometimes on the A&T campus, sometimes on Bennett College campus, sometimes at Guilford, and sometimes at UNCG. And finally the group even had a, had a director and certain funds. Some of the earliest summer sessions abroad were sponsored by this inter-college association.

KH: Oh, PICA, yeah, Piedmont Inter-Collegiate Association.

HH: I don't think that's quite right.

KH: Piedmont Inter-College Association, or some words to that effect.

HH: Something to that effect, yes. And we had a building in Winston-Salem. The old Reynolds estate at that time belonged to this inter-college association, and the director operated out of there, an office in that building.

KH: Okay. So this association amongst the institutions in Greensboro, whether it be through the Piedmont association or through the Inter-Faculty Forum, seems to be more general in scope then just determining what to do about the civil rights situation.

HH: That's true.

KH: And that would have come up in context as appropriate but did not become a focus for the group?

HH: I would say so. I may be stretching a point by associating the two, even. But we in the Inter-Faculty Forum always felt that the Piedmont consortium grew out of our group. We were the ones who brought the college heads together to discuss this question.

KH: And it became institutionalized at that point.

HH: It became institutionalized. But it was racial only in the sense that we always went to Bennett and to A&T.

KH: On a slightly different subject, do you remember any involvement on the part of Guilford students in the civil rights movement?

HH: Well, I tell you, during the height of this thing I was studying at Duke, I had leave for studying, so I was not always here when these things were happening. At the time of the sit-ins I was in Durham.

KH: Oh, okay.

HH: I'm not too clear as to how much the students had to do with it. I think, I think not a great deal. The president of the college at the time was Clyde Milner, who was a Quaker and devoted to principles of racial equality, very zealous of the proper behavior of the Guilford students and careful not to get then involved [unclear] in the city. But anyway, not actually very active.

KH: I've been told by some other sources that--of course, you weren't here so you wouldn't be able to comment on this directly--but that in 1963 in particular, there were some marches organized from the white campuses, so to speak, as people were marching from A&T and Bennett, so that what came together was sort of a mixture of students.

HH: Well, that is true. I'm sure there were Guilford students on those occasions.

KH: Was--you speak of the president of the institution, Dr. Milner, as being dedicated to the principles of racial equality, yet this was a racially segregated institution. Would that be a board of trustees decision or a custom?

HH: Trustees were very adamant. No question.

KH: When did they change their minds?

HH: They changed their minds, as it happens, at a time when Guilford was--I think Guilford had invited Quakers from around the world to a world conference at Guilford in 1967, and from Kenya, there was a large community that grew up from a mission in Kenya--there are presently fourteen thousand Quakers in Kenya; that's why you see blacks from Africa at this meeting over here--and from England, other places, the [unclear, talking to someone in the background].

KH: Good for you. A politic opinion in this household, I can see. [comments directed toward conversation in background]

HH: Well, where were we?

KH: Talking about 1967 and the African [unclear].

HH: Oh, yes. Well, the word came back from Kenya and from England that they would not come to Guilford College if it was segregated, so that put pressure on the trustees. And they very much wanted to have this, this world gathering, so they got together and decided that they would let down the bars. There were other things but this was what brought it to a head.

KH: And when they let down the bars then there was--open admissions is not the right word, but black students then began to be admitted.

HH: It was a very slow process. I think the first year there was, there were perhaps three students and two of them were from Kenya and one from Winston-Salem, a Native American. And so from that it grew, yeah.

KH: Did you teach any of them that first term?

HH: Yes. Well, the first term?

KH: Yes, the first incoming class.

HH: I don't recall that I did. No.

KH: The early students you did teach who were coming into a previously segregated facility, how did they handle the situation? I've talked to Ben Wilson who taught the first black student admitted to Chapel Hill in his English class, and he comments that the fellow

stonewalled his way through. Just went and did his studies and did them with dignity, and let nothing else in the world bother him or get in his way. And I was just wondering how you found the behavior of black students in those first few classes to be.

HH: Well, it's hard to categorize because they're not all the same, you know, [unclear]. So I had some good ones and some not-so-good ones, but that's a hard thing for an integrationist to admit, you know. Some of them are very poor students, you have to face that situation.

KH: Just as one does with white students.

HH: That's right. One of the better students I had--I taught also in the, in the inter-cultural studies program. And one student I had there became a professional basketball player and went to Boston, played with the Boston Celtics and became quite famous nationally [M.L. Carr]. But he was a good student, not a brilliant student, but a good student with the best of attitudes, and, you know, a very fine all-around person. So I had that experience. But as I say, [unclear]

KH: What was his name? I'm a Celtics' fan.

HH: Are you, really? Oh dear.

KH: Who are we talking about?

HH: See if I can remember it now. He was here, gave the commencement address a year ago.

KH: No kidding.

HH: It doesn't come to mind right now. Maybe I'll remember it later.

KH: Well, it's beside the point. I just wondered.

HH: You would recognize him if you're a fan. He's written a book about his life, which he autographed. He was a great player here. He's done many good works in Boston. He's a [unclear] graduate.

KH: How would you characterize race relations in Greensboro today, from your opinion? An opinion question.

HH: Well, I've been on committees of the American Friends Service Committee, which has been very active in integration in North Carolina, during the school integration and things like that, so that I, I've had that experience too. And [pause], I think it looks better to me than it does to many of my friends, I would say, both black and white. As we travel around the country--we travel quite a lot--I find conditions here, relations better than many other places. There's much to be desired but I would say that we get pretty good marks, an A, in my opinion.



KH: All right. Fair enough.

HH: But it was still quite segregated at the time of this gathering I referred to in 1967. And people from other countries were quite shocked and amazed at what they found with race relations here at that time. But since then, within the last year or two, I've talked--I remember a conversation with an Englishman who was here at that meeting in 1967. He was back here and we had talked about him. And I took him around the city and talked about what had happened since then, that's thirty years. And he agreed that there had been a lot of change, a lot of improvement. And in many ways I think there we're maybe ahead of England in some ways.

KH: How so?

HH: I don't know England that well, I threw that in. [both laugh] But I remember a conversation with the librarian in Birmingham, England, some years ago now. He got to talking about race relations in Birmingham and he was an ardent segregationist. And he said, "You know, we need to learn a lot from you Americans, how to handle these black people."

KH: How to handle them, huh?

HH: I guess that prompted the remark I just made. [both laugh]

KH: I guess it would.

HH: Then I read about race riots in London and Los Angeles and Chicago. And in many ways I think Greensboro has reason to be quite proud. When I think of the number of school principals and school teachers--one of the fears that we had in the early days of segregation was that the black teachers from the black schools would all lose their jobs because no white would want a black teacher teaching their children. This hasn't happened. We had a lot of black teachers in the public schools.

KH: This is true.

[recorder paused]

HH: --grave problems remaining, and they may get worse instead of better. But when I think back through those thirty years, I really think that good progress has been made. I was at a meeting I think about a month ago in Pennsylvania, at Pendle Hill, a center out of Philadelphia about twenty miles, and the occasion was a gathering of a group from a Quaker work camp we had in Tennessee in 1937. It was the fifty-second year gathering. And one of the attenders was a psychologist from Harvard, like all of us retired, from Harvard. We weren't all retired from Harvard, but all was retired. And he, knowing that I was in Greensboro, began to talk about race. And he said it was clear to him that, of course, busing had been a dismal failure. And I guess it has been in Boston, it's created a

lot of troubles in Boston. In Greensboro, whatever people may think about it, it's functioned very smoothly.

KH: Yes. And yet in speaking with some members of the black community there seems to be a fair amount of sentiment for returning to a neighborhood school idea.

HH: Right. Well, David McCollum[?] was the psychologist. So it's true that for many reasons it's not an ideal solution to the problem. The concept of a neighborhood school is an attractive thing. In a segregated city it also means segregated schools. [pause] We saw a bit of Philadelphia during the time we were up there--hadn't been there for many years--and Philadelphia is not a shining example of race relations--well, certainly not of the conditions under which the blacks in the city are living.

KH: This is true of many of the cities in the northeast, of course. [pause] You say Greensboro's come a long way and yet there's still work to be done. Where would you see that work being done? Where should Greensboro go next?

HH: Well, partly coming out of the student experience--it is in Greensboro but all over in the race situations--the blacks have come up with a new name for themselves, African Americans. And I think that this is a futile and foolish argument. In Latin America there is no name for black people. They're people. I mean, why give them any special name? And you know, in terms of an ideal solution in the long run for this thing, I would say that [unclear] we can come to an elimination of terminology, although there are badges of difference that are perceived. This is not a popular concept among the blacks anymore than it is among the whites, in fact less so I guess. Depends upon which blacks you talk with. The "black" term was never, was never a good term, because many people who are regarded as being black in the United States are far from being black.

KH: How true. [pause] Yes, I remember my first experience in the southeast was coming to Duke, and I grew up in Pittsburgh, which was a northeastern major city. And there wasn't really a lot of social intercourse or otherwise between white and black. There were segregated neighborhoods. And coming to Durham and seeing so-called black people with freckles and red hair was really amazing to me. I had seen people I would recognize as black but for those sorts of people and those appearances to be labeled as black was a real awakening for me. You're right.

Well, is there anything I've forgotten to ask you that I ought to? Anything you want to add that I haven't--

HH: Well, I feel that I've cheated you because I can remember so little about the Inter-Faculty Forum. It's been along time.

KH: Yeah, I know it has. Dr. Wilson, Ben remembers it quite clearly. Apparently it meant a lot to him and he was quite actively involved in it in the period you were at Duke, about '63. And he remembers members of the Forum going to the demonstrations downtown, not as chaperones per se, but just to keep an eye on what students were doing, just to have a presence there from the faculty, and to observe, and such.

HH: Well, my being away prevented my [unclear].

KH: I'm sure, but that's all right, you've said some interesting things. Is there anything I've forgotten or--

HH: Well, I'll say I'd like to be back five hundred years from now and see how it's all worked out, because I, I'm, you know, a history person and these things take a lot of time. It's not just an excuse. A lot of people had to die. I am unbelieving in the changes that have occurred in it, so [unclear].

KH: Yes, some folks I've spoken with have told me that--and these tend to be people who've grown up in rather conservative background in Greensboro, born and bred--have told me that things were fine before a few troublemakers came in and really got the racists stirred up. Have you come across that attitude?

HH: Oh sure.

KH: What do you think about it?

HH: Well, things were fine as long as they said, you know, the blacks stayed in their place, as long as they were willing to limit themselves to service jobs, which they very often did. Except in our case, Greensboro is blessed with two colleges, so we've always had a core of educated people here so that's made a difference. But you still see maids waiting out at the curb to get their buses, and the buses are 99 percent full of black people. So they're still down near the bottom of the pile, I guess, economically.

But not all of them. I remember going out to the airport Hilton out here, which is the nearest motel, for lunch one day and I was simply amazed at the number of black guests, immaculately dressed and obviously not much worried about money, that kind of situation. And you know, it's just a different world. They wouldn't have even been allowed to go in there the beginning of the sixties. The troublemakers are the ones that brought about this change.

But you know, I think China has shown us it's possible to slip back, and I'm afraid that this is what might happen if we do away with school busing. The Supreme Court decisions reported in the paper this morning--

KH: Yes. How did the headline go, "Supreme Court Gives Power to White Men"?

HH: Yes. That's a long, hard struggle, and I think you go forward two steps and hopefully slip back one. I mean, that's a part of history, to be expected. But to go back, to go forward two steps and slip back three or four, that's an unnerving prospect.

KH: But it has happened.

HH: It has happened. [pause]. But I--last night--we have a family member who's had mental problems, and we belong to the [National] Alliance for the Mentally Ill. And the speaker

to this mostly-white group last night--there might have been one or two blacks there--was a very black woman who is the head of the case managers in the mental health department here in the city of Greensboro. This would not have happened thirty years ago. She was very articulate, very well received.

We had wonderful soloist with a musical group over here at the Dana Auditorium [at Guilford College]. I remember when I was sitting there thinking what a contrast to the world that, you know, her grandparents and great grandparents would have been back to slavery, and to see this person performing in public to an adulating audience. I'm sort of interested in this whole matter. I actually did my dissertation at Duke on Quakers and slavery in North Carolina. I published it, the thesis, as a matter of fact. So I have a lot of interest in the whole thing.

KH: I imagine so.

[End of Interview]