

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

INTERVIEWEE: Linda McDougale

INTERVIEWER: William Link

DATE: October 5, 1988

[Begin Tape 1, Side A]

WILLIAM LINK: This is William Link, and the date is October 5, 1988, and we are in Greensboro talking with Linda McDougale. I wonder if you'd mind just beginning our conversation by talking about your background, where you were born, and eventually how you came to Greensboro.

LINDA MCDOUGLE: Okay. I was born in Burlington [North Carolina] and I grew up primarily on a farm in Burlington, out in the county. My parents were uneducated people who felt very strongly that the only way for black folks to make it was to have an education and, quote, to--what my daddy would say--to "learn to make it in a white man's world." He had four daughters. He raised us all to do whatever had to be done. We worked on the farm. We never hired anybody because--it was unfortunate to my daddy that he had girls, but that just happened to be what he had and he was going to use what he had to do, what needed to be done on the farm. We were all raised to do anything that came up. We did all the plowing and we primed the tobacco. We hung the tobacco. We worked on the house. We re-roofed the house. In other words, whatever kind of work came up.

We were not thought of as being girls at that time. We were raised pretty much to do whatever was necessary, but to be perfect young ladies at the same time. We all drove buses. We all were active in school. We were all honor students because in my house you did nothing but your best, and nothing less than your best was ever tolerated by my father. My mother was a quiet woman. I guess as you can see my father really ruled the household, and none of us ever questioned anything that my father said. I think the thing that I probably remember the most was the idea you need to have the skills to make it in this world. You should never take a second class job or be treated as a second class person because you're a female or because you're black. You should be able to learn whatever is necessary to make it in this world and to make it in what he always termed to be "a white man's world."

He was just as concerned about the “maleness” as he was about the racial issues, and he was never bitter about that. My father could easily have passed for white had he chosen to do so. But his thing--and he said to us any number of times--that would be living a lie and living a lie is not much living. So his outlook was pretty positive. He was a land owner. He always paid for everything in cash or he didn't pay for it, he didn't buy it. [If] you could not buy something and pay for it you didn't have it. And we were exceedingly poor, but I don't remember at that time knowing that I was poor. I--most of my friends had no more than I did, but we were extremely poor. But we did not realize that because my father never made an issue of that. He always said to us that you can not let anybody put you down, ever. That you must assist in the put-down in order to be put down or in order to be treated second class. So if you don't participate in the second class treatment then you're not, in essence, second class.

He also never allowed us to do much with showing emotions. He said women are characteristically known for doing that. Keep in mind, this was forty some years ago when I was a child and his feelings were that he was not going to raise a young lady or a girl to go out and weep her way through the world. And these are the things that people at that time thought women ought to be doing, but that your emotions were your emotions and the world did not need to deal with that. You needed to deal with that. The people did not need to know specifically how you felt about something. We are all fairly positive in our outlook [laughs], I think, because we had no choice but to be that way.

School was fun for us. It was in a sense second class, because of the kinds of materials that we had. All of our books were cast-offs from the white schools. I remember many of our materials were just really poor in design and nature. Most of our teachers were of the highest quality because at that time in order for black teachers to teach in North Carolina, they had to have master's degrees, where many of the white teachers could teach and make the same salary with a bachelor's degree. And that was quite unfortunate, but that's the way it was.

WL: Did you attend a county school? Was it in Burlington?

LM: When I was in elementary school we lived closer to town and I attended a city school, and in my high school days I attended school in the county. And of course my bus route was about a hundred miles one way because we went by all the white schools to pick up all the outlying black youngsters. And on a bus that's, you know--it's dark when we left in the morning and almost dark when we arrived in the evening. A great deal of time was spent, you know, on the bus.

WL: How did you feel about that--your emotion at that time--did you get used to it?

LM: Well, when you're raised that way and you're taught that's the way it is--My daddy said "This is the way it is." But when you get to be an adult--he always emphasized you lived in a white world, a predominately white, male world, and that things would not be this way. And that you would just have to learn to deal with that. There was not a whole lot of talking done about it, that's the way it was. And folks pretty much, when I was younger, accepted that, and did not do much questioning because black folks did not have power to do a lot about it.

In church we got talked to a good bit about that. My granddaddy was a Baptist preacher. He did not preach characteristically black preacher sermons from what I could gather from my friends. But his idea was to go to school, to graduate from school, to work hard, to not particularly buck the system, but to be so good that nobody could ever not reward you as much as blacks could be rewarded at that time. He also preached the ownership, get out of the tenant farming business. Of course we were never into that. But to do whatever was necessary to have your own piece of land and your own whatever you could have. And I remember he didn't think much about cars and fancy things, you know, it was the basics and to save every penny you could to get ahead.

WL: Was there--but there--was there sort of a common understanding in the black community that this was an unjust system, or just something that you--

LM: Yes. There was a real common understanding that this was not just--that this was not right. It was especially obvious to me because I had a large number of my aunts and uncles who did go to the north and pass over, cross over the line and I have cousins now who do not know that they are black. They are fair enough in skin color that they have never been told that they are black and most of my family comes from the blond hair and blue eyes and very, very fair skin. And many individuals you would not be able to tell, so in my family in particular, I got a really good message about the inequity. I knew what my cousins could do in the north and I knew what we were unable to do. People thought that it was unjust, that it was unfair, but that's the way it was and you dealt with the way it was--not a lot, when I was young, about how it could be, that came later in my life.

But all of us, all of my sisters and I graduated from high school. We were all honor graduates, either first or second in our classes, again because that was what my father expected. The same thing was true when we went to college. I had graduated from high school with no hopes of going to college, the thought hadn't crossed my mind too much except two teachers at the school that I attended who said, "You do have possibilities, you got a good mind, you have got to make use of that."

My daddy thought that high school graduation was the ultimate, in his mind. And he didn't know much about colleges either. He said, "Well, whatever you want to do--you want to go, you go." And the implication was you go and you pay for it, which I did.

All of my sisters and I worked and got loans and worked our way through school. I worked as a cashier in a grocery store. And I started that job when I was in high school and I was one of the first--probably the first black woman in Alamance County to do that in an "all-white," quote, store. And it was a big to-do; people thought that no one would shop at the store and they were real upset about the fact that there's going to be somebody colored working in the store. And they couldn't figure out which one it was and people finally got used to the fact that I was there and that was when people--the owner, I guess--would say, "She's the one."

And after that, he moved people really of color--you could tell--into the setting, and people continued to shop at the store. It was not as big a deal after they got used to the fact. You know, people are basically people wherever you go. And if folks get used to you and know you as a person first and then deal with the racial issue, it's a lot easier.

WL: But the store owner at some point had to make a decision whether to, in effect, desegregate the workforce?

LM: That's correct. He had another fair-skinned male, black male, who was working there, much fairer than I, with blue eyes. And nobody--that had not been a problem. But to move a woman in at that time was a major problem because most of the grocery stores were really operated by males. Very few women worked on the cash registers, black or white, at that time. There were other blacks working in the store, but they worked to put the stock on the shelf and they worked in the back in the meat market and they were the carriers and then unloaders and so on. But it was a conscious decision on his part and I think a very difficult decision for him to make. He was very fair and open-minded about the issue and talked with me quite honestly about the kinds of problems that might arise.

WL: What would be just--while we're on the subject--when you were a child, an adolescent--what other kinds of job-related discrimination existed? In other words, what sort of jobs did whites occupy and what sorts of jobs did blacks occupy in Burlington and surrounding counties?

LM: Blacks in our area were farmers, mostly tenant farmers, which meant you lived on the white man's land and then when your crop was finished in the fall or whatever, you got usually a quarter of whatever profits were made, because you were living in the house and being provided with wood from the man's property in order to heat the house. The houses were basically shanties, I mean they were not much of a house. But that, to me, was a big discrimination kind of thing. I remember thinking how unfair that was when I was little and hearing my daddy talk about it, and the fact that he'd never live like that. And he was glad that he didn't have to live like that.

WL: And they worked shares, in other words? They would do sort of a sharecroppers--

LM: It was sharecropping. They were sharecropping. And most of the women, if they worked outside the home, worked to clean houses for white folks, and mamma took in washing and ironing. That was a common kind of thing.

It was great to get a job working in a textile mill. Most of the men, if they worked outside, off the farm, worked in textile mills, and for women that was just an unbelievable great job to be able to work in a textile mill. Wages were extremely low and conditions were extremely poor.

WL: When you went to--where did you attend college?

LM: I went to North Carolina Central in Durham.

WL: So you maintained your job in--your cashier job, was that right, when you were still in high school?

LM: Yes, and when I went to Durham the man also owned a store in Durham. And he was willing for me to work on the weekends in Durham to have something that--it's interesting too, to say that this person was, I think, a very interesting man. He tripled my wages, the hourly wages that others got, I got three times the amount that they got when I went to college because I could only work two days a week, Saturday and Sunday. And he could only work me X number of hours, so he always paid me in cash and the money was always three times the going rate at that time.

WL: So he was paying you full-time wages for working--

LM: He was paying me full-time wages for that because--he didn't discuss it much, he said to me, "You will notice that your pay is different. I guess you've got sense enough to keep your mouth shut. If you haven't, you don't have the job and you won't get the pay. I know you want to go to school and I think that you ought to go to school and as long as you're willing to do this, I'm willing to help." And that was the way we worked.

WL: Was this--was this then unusual for relations, say employee-employer relations? Especially between black employee and a white employer?

LM: Yes. Very unusual. Wasn't much said. Usually if the boss, whoever the boss happened to be, marked the orders and there was not a lot of discussion back and forth.

WL: What about normal day-to-day relations, again, focusing on your childhood and adolescence, between whites and blacks?

LM: Again, for me at home, it was totally different than what I found away from home. I always lived in a white neighborhood and the folks around me always treated us--when we helped each other out on the farm. In other words, if the folks up the street, their tobacco was coming in and they needed somebody to help, we'd go up and help. And they returned the favor, there was no money exchanged.

When we got ready to eat, characteristically, blacks and whites did not sit at the same table. We never had that problem. We had about as much as the white folks that lived around us, so when they came to our house, we all sat down and ate at the same table and we went to their house we all did that. When anybody in the community died we went to the funeral or went to the house. We took food, so the home setting for me, through my life, has not been very different. I grew up with whites, I never saw a whole lot of difference in terms of people. Part of that was the way my daddy raised us, not to look at the differences, but to look at what was alike. And I think, ultimately, it has affected the way I have looked at things, of course as an adult--to see how I was raised.

Now when you were outside the immediate neighborhood, if I went to town and somebody white wanted to walk a certain way, I had to get out of the way. I mean when we--I remember when I was little, when we got on the bus we had to go to the back. Occasionally the bus driver would know who we were and I guess felt that we weren't going to contaminate anybody and he'd say, "Why don't y'all come and sit here near the front?" But the bus driver always had the authority to do that and if the bus got pulled before we got to town and where we were going on the bus, if it started filling up, we automatically knew that our place was in the back. And we moved to the back.

There were real clear delineations about what you did and what you didn't do when you left your house, and I just remembered my daddy's expression was that, "White folks don't like smart-ass niggers." And it was said--I mean nothing negative about it at all. It was just that you learn what your place is and keep your mouth shut and there were always black folks there who would be able to do that. To lead you and guide you and tell you what your place was. And they didn't let you get out of line.

[Tape turned off--then back on]

WL: We were just talking about the--I guess what might be called the racial etiquette when you were in your childhood and adolescence in Burlington.

LM: Yeah, well, outside the home there were real clear delineations. If we got in the car to go somewhere, before you went somewhere outside your area, you were reminded, you

know, "If somebody white wants to walk down the street and you were in their way, get out of the way."

WL: You would be reminded by, say, an older--

LM: Oh, yes. By an older adult, anybody that was older--and back then, everybody was your mamma and daddy. I mean if you were somewhere and someone else who knew your family saw you doing something wrong, without question they would step in correct you, and you were to respond appropriately to that person as though it were your parent. You did not fuss back or say anything back under any circumstances. That would call for a big whipping once you got home, because they would surely tell your mom and daddy what you've done, and so it was that kind of relationship. Everybody assumed the role of parent.

And there were things like you couldn't drink from the water fountain. And I remember asking my mamma later why, and she told us it was nasty. She said, "You can't drink from that because it's nasty and only white folks drink from that." And she said that was the only thing she could think of at the time, because that was one of the times when apparently she was unable to shut us up about wanting to drink the water from the water fountain. And there was a sign on the water fountain that, you know, you couldn't drink from it. And I think at her time, she--her tone of voice was that, "It's nasty and only white folks drink from it. You can't drink from it." And by her tone of voice we knew it was time to leave that issue alone, because you didn't question. That was another thing, you didn't question. So whatever you were told by those adults and family, you did. You followed it.

WL: Is there--did the high school--you attended high school in Burlington? And that was a black high school?

LM: Yes. Yes.

WL: What quality of education do you think it offered black students? Of course, black high schools are--this is sort of the age of a black high school, in a sense. At the beginning of the 1920s and thirties you attended--

LM: I was--it was in the fifties.

WL: In the fifties? So--

LM: I graduated from high school in '62.

WL: How would evaluate your high school education, just [unclear]—

LM: I think it was pretty good. In most cases it was excellent. A lot of people find that hard to believe because of the inequities in funding and the inequities in supplies and materials. But that's because you're looking back on it. We have so much more now in the schools. The key at that time was the dedication of the teachers.

True, we had old facilities. We had old buildings.

But we had teachers that were unbelievably dedicated to making sure that you were going to do well. They knew your parents. They knew your grandparents. They knew your aunts. They knew everybody else in the family. You didn't ever breathe the wrong way. You did exactly what you were told to do, even at school. They pushed you and pushed you and pushed you. If they decided that you were going to do well, you were going to do well and you were going to go to college. And there were daily lectures, meaning that they would call you out in the hall and let you know that you've missed something by half of a point. They were real rigid individuals. Not a lot of patting you on the back or any of that. It was, "Let's get on with this." I mean it was strictly business. It was a lot of regimentation as I remember, but an excellent education.

I've never had any problems. I was highly motivated for lots of reasons, mainly because my daddy said I was going to be. But I remember that all my friends knew how to read early. We all went to school not knowing a single alphabet and not having seen a book, many of us, other than maybe the Bible. But we all read. And I remember even the slowest kids, even in high school, read fairly well, well enough to get through the newspaper if you were lucky enough to have one. And they could read the Bible and the Bible's real difficult to read. But I remember people were able to do that, quote, "even the dummies." You know, there was always a group that were the dummies. They were not going to do anything with their lives. I mean they already said they were going to be farmers and we, at that time, pictured farming as not doing anything with your life. But even those youngsters got the basic skills to go.

WL: When high school teachers would encourage exceptional students or the better students to go on to college, typically where would they guide students toward? What institutions?

LM: The institutions that they graduated from. And those basically, at that time, were A&T [North Carolina A&T State University], Winston-Salem State University, North Carolina Central University; those were basically the options, [and] Bennett College. Those were basically the options that were given. Some people were encouraged to go to Shaw University. But as I remember those were the institutions that my teachers graduated from, so they sent you back where they had gone.

WL: When you went to Central, what kind of differences did you find there?

LM: Oh, remarkable differences! [laughs] It was like another world, and when I say that I mean really like another world. I mean it's a great deal of freedom in a sense. Although Central at that time was extremely rigid in terms of what young women did and what young men did. I mean there were clear lines of delineation there, but this was a bigger city. You see, I lived in Burlington and I'd only been to Greensboro just a few times to shop, and now I had the freedom of getting on the bus and going downtown.

At that time too, things were beginning to change a little bit. Blacks were questioning. They were asking certain kinds of questions. And I became somewhat caught up in that. I could not allow my daddy to know that because he would die. I mean he sent me to school, he sent me. Not that he sent me with money, but he sent me off to school. And his comment was, when I left, "Don't ever forget where you come from. And I don't want you coming home talking so folks don't know what you talking about. I want you to be able to come back home and talk with these folks here. They need to always understand what you saying, and I want you to be able to understand them."

That was kind of funny. Kind of a strange dichotomy, because my daddy would never allow us to speak "black English" at home. I don't know what we spoke. It was not standard English either. We could never use the jive kind of terms, or whatever was the cool thing, or the thing of fashion with our friends at school. That called for a quick reprimand. And as daddy said, "You go to school to learn how to talk like white folks talk. You learn whatever skills you need to learn because that's what you're going to need out there." But he said, "You know, there are lots of words. And you need to be able to talk the talk wherever you happen to be. [If] you're dealing with black folks you need to be able to sound black enough that they can relate to that. If you're with white folks--you been raised with white folks before, you know how they are. And you just learn to say whatever you need to say."

So it was kind of funny that he had all that going on in his mind, being an uneducated man. But that's the way he saw it. But that was my clear direction--was not to get above my raising when I went to college. And I still go home and I still go back to visit the white neighbors and the other folks we knew. And that's one of the things people say is that unconsciously, when I'm there, I latch right back into their speech patterns. And it's been effective for me, especially in dealing with all kinds of youngsters in some of the educational settings that I've been in, because I do switch very easily from one dialect to another.

WL: You go back and forth that way?

LM: Yes. And it's unconscious most of the time.

WL: But you started at Central, this would have been in '62? Fall of '62?

LM: Sixty-two.

WL: And this was a period during which civil rights movement was afoot?

LM: Yes. Very much afoot--the marches, the demonstrations, the sit-ins. Those of us who wanted to participate had actively trained in how to respond during marches. They took sticks and poked at us and put us in situations, taught us the techniques of nonviolent demonstration, taught us, or led us, down certain kinds of pathways of role playing, "What are you going to do when somebody spits on you. How do you deal with dogs being turned loose on you?"

And for me it was very difficult because I wanted to be involved and was actively involved, but I brought attention to black folks and they did not like being singled out. If I marched I was poor white trash, and I was called such by anybody who was around, and other things that insinuated that I was sleeping with black folks that I was with, and dogs were turned loose on us in particular because I would be there. So it was almost a--almost a feeling of your own not wanting you. I didn't fit. I've never quite fit in with whatever a group was that were blacks. It's always been, "You don't look quite enough like us. White folks don't particularly want to accept you because you look too much like they do." And that brings back other memories. Some--to look as I did in the sixties--because at that time my hair was very light, it's darkened over the years--was a difficult time, and it's a difficult time to me personally because of my need to be involved, and always being raised to look at equity issues and to be conscious of them. And to almost not be wanted to participate in those episodes. That was hard for me.

WL: So most of the resentment--a lot of the resentment--was coming from blacks?

LM: Blacks. Because they did not want the attention they got if I was with them. They did not want the additional negative attention.

WL: They wanted to focus on, just on the question of the issues that they were raising?

LM: That's correct.

WL: These activities were mostly sort of in and around Durham?

LM: Yes. Durham-Chapel Hill area--and a lot of students, particularly from Duke [University], most of the students, the white students that marched with us, were from Duke. And they were very supportive, very understanding. And yet we often times didn't trust them. When I say "we" I mean we as a total group. Some of us who had had contact

with whites were more trusting. We had one or two white instructors on campus at the time and we understood those two instructors and knew what their commitments were. But for the average black, it was very difficult to tell them that there were whites that understood, really understood. I remember hearing folks saying, "They don't know what it's like to be black." And being suspicious of, "Why are they really here? Are they infiltrating so they can go back and talk with other people about what we're doing, what we're thinking?" So there was a little bit of distrust there.

WL: What about the relations with--between, say, young blacks and old blacks? Is there a certain generation gap here?

LM: Terrible generation gap. I'd go home and my daddy would say, "What all supposed to be down there doing?" And I'd just lie and say, "I don't really know a lot about that daddy." There's no way I was going to tell him I was involved in it. I mean that would have been the end of the world. He always thought you fought your battles privately. You didn't wear your feelings on your sleeve. You didn't go out. You did what you had to do as an individual and you made your own changes as an individual. And he taught me that an individual can be, make a difference in this world. And I understood that, but I knew that this was bigger than me or any one person, and that I had to be involved in it. People, black folks were afraid; parents were scared. We were overturning something they'd lived in all their lives. And all their parents had lived that way. And they were scared and they were really afraid for safety as much as anything else, and afraid to change.

WL: Insecure about what would follow?

LM: Very much so. Very much so. They knew what they had and they knew how to exist the way they were, even though it wasn't fair, they knew. And there's something in knowing. There's some security in knowing.

WL: Why do you suppose this all happened so quickly like this? It's almost as if the generation suddenly sort of grew up, and--of young activists--just suddenly sort of appeared on the scene.

LM: I don't know. Timing--I'm a firm believer that things happen at the right time, that things just come about, and that there are always going to be people there at any critical point. And this was a very critical point for black folk then, and white folks too. It just all clicked at the right time. Martin Luther King, I think, achieved--

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

WL: At North Carolina Central, what motivated you to move into education? What made you decide to--at what point did you decide to--that you were interested in schools? Or did you? I'm supposing that you did since you're here.

LM: There's never been any question that I'd go into education. That was something that I'd always wanted to do. I thought it was an honorable kind of profession. And when I was growing up, teachers and preachers, I mean, and physicians, there was just nothing better than to be one of those things. And after spending some time with my grandfather--who of course I told you was a Baptist Minister--I knew that I was not that kind of religious. I was more the kind of person that believed in doing what's right each day. But I wasn't going to be very much into the religious aspect. Plus, at that time, black women just didn't do that. So that left being a physician or a being a teacher. And of course I had a great experience with all of my teachers. And ultimately I was offered some financial aid to go to med school but knew that I could not afford to do that at that time and had made the clear choice that education was what I wanted to do. And I haven't changed in that. I would still like to be in a classroom of youngsters if I could do that. I like that very much, and was good at doing that.

WL: When you--where was your first job?

LM: My first job was here in Greensboro. I was interviewed and asked some key questions--I think of them as key now, [although] I didn't think much about it then because I--when I came for the interview, apparently it clicked in the individual's mind who was doing the interview of me, that maybe I needed to be placed in a predominately white setting.

Greensboro was integrating its teaching staff, but had not done anything with the actual student population. And I was asked would I consider going into a white school. And I said, "You know, I need a job. And it doesn't concern me very much about who I'll be teaching." And they asked lots of questions about my experiences and background. And I kept noticing the smiles, I remember the smiles now, I didn't think much about it then.

I think in their minds, I'm clicking, "Ah ha. We've got one here that we might be able to work into a school and see how this works." Initially, I understand, looking back, that they chose the very best white [sic-black] teachers that they had to put into predominately white settings to see how it will work out, to see if this is something we can logically and feasibly move toward doing. And I happened along, I guess, at the right time--or the wrong time, as some people say. But I got the job. And the job was in earth science and I was not trained in earth science. I was trained as a biologist and my major was biology and health. And of course I knew nothing about earth science and I had to read every night to stay ahead and to figure out what I was going to do with these youngsters.

I talked with the principal when I initially went, and said to him, I said, "I'm sure you know that I'm black and I feel the need to say that to you, but I don't feel the need to say that to children."

And he said, "I think that's fine." He said, "Honey, looking like you do in the South, being black, you gonna catch hell anywhere you go, if you want to catch hell." He said "It's all going to depend on your attitude."

And I said, "Well, you know, I'm here to teach kids and that's what I'm going to do. And the racial thing is not going to be made an issue of, unless somebody else makes an issue of it. And I will deal with that."

And when kids ask, "Are you black?", I'm going to say, "Of course I'm black. I thought you knew."

And when kids would say, "I can't believe that you're black," I would say, "Well here's my drivers license. You see the B on here? That's--." Whatever.

And when they'd make comments in class--sometimes they'd make comments about, "Niggers do this," and I'd say, "All black people don't do that. Some black people do this, this, and this."

And it was never a major problem for me. It could have been. The first day students marched down the hall and said, "Nigger go home," with banners, and the principal cleared them out real quickly. But they didn't stop at my door, they stopped at the white teacher's door that they thought was black because she was browner than I am. And when we went to school we had PTA [Parent Teacher Association] meetings, nobody would sit near me. And there was a group of children that would come and sit with me. At each PTA meeting they would always come and sit with me. I attended all their little dances and there were always children who would come and stand near me and talk to me. The kids and I got along fine.

Sometimes they would ask me to come home or take them home with me or to their own homes and I would do that. The agreement that we had was, "If my mamma don't ask you if you're black, don't tell her." And my agreement was, "I will not bring that issue up. If your mother asks me, I will tell her." So we had that understanding that I was not going to lie about the situation.

Some kids would say, "My parents don't understand," and my comment was, "I can see that through my parents don't understand some things that I've done either."

But the youngsters and I had a real good time together. I got some of the worst classes in the world, but we got through the year. Kids knew that I liked them and knew that I cared about them but knew that they were going to respect me, and so that was just a clear understanding. There was no problem. Kids are kids. I had one or two black kids in my classes that year. We never had any major problems with that.

Parents had some difficulties. PTA night, parents came to see the black--or the "nigger teacher"--and asked me where her room was, where was the nigger teaching science. And I said, "I think I'm the one you're looking for."

“No, no. We’re looking for the nigger.”
I said, “Well, I am the black science teacher.”
And the mother said, “I don’t think you understand.”
And the father said, “I think I do. Let’s leave.” And so they did.

WL: Did they mean that--was that meant abusive, you think? Or, why would they want--

LM: I think--well, at that time, when you had open house and PTA for the first time, everybody was kind of like everybody--all the parents went from teacher to teacher to teacher so they took their kid’s schedule. They looked at them to see who they were and said, “I’m so-and-so’s mom,” you know, that kind of thing. And they had heard that their child was in a black teacher’s class and I think that was difficult for them to deal with.

But I don’t get--I didn’t and still don’t get real mad about people. They have to deal with those feelings. Daddy always said, “If you sit there and help them and you get wound up--you don’t ever let anybody get you mad. You make that decision. That’s your choice. You can choose to be mad or you can choose to take an ambivalent attitude about it.” And my attitude was always, “I’m a teacher first. And I’m going to do what’s good for kids. And I’m not going to be rattled about the fact that you can’t deal with liking or disliking blacks, or you can’t handle your feelings.” And that’s just the way I did it.

WL: Was there a change, say, over the first year in this sort of thing? Did black parents get worse about or better about it?

LM: They got better about it. And I don’t know, there are lots of reasons for that. I, as a first year teacher, was pretty good. That was one thing. They saw me, they saw me not looking too different from them. Saw me doing the same kinds of things that they did. Knew that I was interested in their kids with several bad problems that happened that were just problems that happened to people. A child was playing with a kite and it got hung on an electrical wire and I went to the hospital to see the kid, called him regularly--our classes did little notes, things I would do for any kid. It’s not that he’s a white kid, because all my kids basically were white kids. I mean, human interest kinds of things.

One child’s parents--mother or father, I can’t remember--which was real sick, and I went to the hospital to visit the parent. I called to see if there were things we could do. One child in the class was very, very poor and we collected food and some of the class members and I went to visit the kid and deliver the food to the house. Things you probably wouldn’t do now. But back then it was fine to say that, “I’m having a hard time and somebody help me.” And you know, we did that. Just a lot of little issues like that.

We got into a garden that was at the school, trimming it, planting things. Kids who have never had a chance to hole dig had a chance to do that. We broke a water pipe and the kid thought he hit the water, you know, the water table underneath, and you know

I didn't cuss the kid out like some teachers would have, you know. And I went to the principal and took full responsibility for it because I was there and we didn't know there was a water pipe there. And the principal was impressed by the way that I dealt with things and didn't allow people to get rattled.

The teachers even got a little bit used to me. They were very standoffish. I remember my first day going. Several teachers walked in and said, "Lord, we got a nigger here this year that's going to be teaching. Wonder what she's going to look like. Wonder what she's going to smell like. Wonder what she's going to talk like." And they went into some of their black dialect, "She's going to sound this way. She's going to do this. And what's the world coming to?" And they said, "Oh, hi. How are you?" And I said, "Well, I guess I'm fine. I'm the nigger teacher y'all have been talking about." And they thought I was kidding, "Aw, come on, come on, you're full of it today." And I said, "You know, I'm really the black teacher who's here to spend the year with you. It's been real good seeing you." And I just excused myself and walked out. And even today those people sometimes have real problems talking with me. But everybody else--the word got around that I was a pretty good sport about most things. People get used to people.

WL: It must have been, must have been interesting being able to walk into the situation of whites and sort of see the attitude toward--

LM: That's been a--well, it's enlightening. Because every job I've been in, I've been able to really understand, to really feel how blacks and whites feel about each other. Because even in this job, I'll have black folks who come in here and question the decision, and it's because they think a white has made the decision. And when I'll say, "But I'm black. I made this decision," then there will be a different reaction. So we still base a lot of things on the blackness and whiteness rather than deal with the issue. And a lot of times people are forced to deal with issues when they deal with me because I don't fit quote, "the mold" of what they expect.

WL: What--getting back to--you stayed at Jackson School for how long?

LM: For about four and a half years, until my son was born. And then I came back to Jackson after he was born and worked for a year, and then went in as an assistant principal at that same school. So as the assistant principal, I really hit the integration--that's when we integrated the schools.

WL: So you came back to an assistant principal, this would be nineteen seventy--

LM: It was probably about seventy-two.

WL: Seventy-two?

LM: Because I taught one year at the school before becoming assistant principal.

WL: When you first came to Jackson in 1966, was there much feeling that this school system was going to change? And to what extent was this kind of feeling--was there a feeling--let me restate that--was there a feeling that the present freedom of choice system was going to do it? Was that going to be satisfactory in terms of satisfying *Brown* [v. *Board of Education*] and the *Brown* decision and the whole question of desegregation?

LM: The system knew that they were going to integrate the schools. And they knew that that was going to be a real option. We were under court order to do that around that time, and I'm not exactly sure when that was. But anyway, we received a decision that we had to--we were under court order to desegregate, so we knew that there were going to be major changes.

WL: Especially what would be acceptable?

LM: Yes, what would be acceptable, what would work with parents. The involvement in Greensboro had tough times. I won't say to you there weren't tough times. They were not nearly as tough as some other places because of the energies and the efforts that went into, "How are we going to do this process?" We had lots of meetings, lots of retreats--parents and teachers working together. Retreats away from Greensboro, planning what we'll do with busing, how we'll handle it. Parents rode the buses to monitor. A lot of involvement, just an awful lot of involvement in the processing of it, the working through it.

And everybody had to be tough. I mean everybody had to hang tough because the white folks would tell their kids, "Don't let the niggers run over you," especially the poor whites. The poor blacks were [saying], "Don't let them white folks get to you now. They bump you, you bump them back." I mean there were lots--there were a lot--there were lots of modes for venting hostilities that had built up for years. Many of these youngsters had experienced some totally segregated societies. But keep in mind they can shop, they can eat out. They were doing everything with the exception of going to school with each other. And of course going to church with each other and being married. And I mean going to church and marrying are still things that black folks and white folks don't mix up a whole lot. Not here in Greensboro. [laughs] So just a lot of open hostility.

WL: This was right when--we're talking now about the period of when desegregation actually occurs?

LM: When it actually occurred. And parents continued to meet. We still had citizens who met on a regular basis to give advice to try to keep things calm--black citizens or white citizens of note, people who had some quote "prestige in the community" to keep the lid on things.

WL: Who were the--what was the nature of people who opposed desegregation? Or was there, was there white opposition--there was white opposition. To what extent was there black opposition?

LM: Oh yes, there was black opposition because a lot of black folks felt that "This is just one more thing and they're going to take our identity"; and that's why we went through the "black is beautiful" stage. [Blacks thought], "All our identity is going to be taken. We'll be swooped up." [They thought] "We have no--white folks think that black folks have no culture, so what culture we have is going to be just swept away. Our youngsters are not going to have the key leadership roles they've had in the past."

You know, in an all-black setting you're guaranteed you're going to have eight all-black cheerleaders. If that's all you got in the school is all blacks, you know you could have all black. Whites--in fact our cheerleading issue was one of the most important issues that we dealt with, making sure we had representation of blacks and whites on the cheering squads.

Black folks just thought that they were going to be swallowed up. That it was another snow job. That, "Our kids are not going to be taken care of. They don't really think our kids are worth dealing with. They're going to be stuffed over into a corner." And some people still feel like that. Some blacks wanted it to be a totally all--they didn't want any change at all. They wanted their all-black high schools, their all-black whatever. This is what they felt they truly needed. You'll find some blacks that'll talk to you today and they'll tell you that integration has been terrible for black folk. That the kids don't get a chance to excel, that they're whatever--but that their kids are not being treated fairly. Their kids don't make it in this world because of the integrations.

WL: Yeah, I guess there's a natural resentment with the loss of their neighborhood--their neighborhood schools.

LM: Oh yes. Real resentful.

WL: What about white opposition? To what extent?

LM: Oh, gosh yes. They don't want their children to have to deal with low-life. A large number in any society you've got all the pecking orders. And if you were white you were automatically, in white mind, a step above anything that was black. And then when you

throw everybody together, and then the poor white youngsters come from situations very much like poor black situations--there's not a whole lot of difference. There wasn't anybody to look down on all of a sudden. And again, that security blanket. "How am I going to react to this situation? You mean I got to sit beside something that I been looking down on?" Those were just a lot of that bitterness, a lot of the resentment.

WL: A lot of it seemed to have focused on actually the buses, the school buses?

LM: Oh yes. School buses were an easy thing to focus on. When in fact kids have been bussed all their lives and kids like being on the buses. They don't have any problem with it. It's adults. And I felt a little uncomfortable about putting my kindergartner on a bus to ride across town. And I'm pretty open-minded. I just--to me that's an awful long way for him to have to go to school [laughs].

And to get on the bus, he got on at seven [a.m.] to get to school by eight. And I thought that was--I didn't care much about that, but he loved being on the bus. And I was not going to quibble about it or fuss about it, again, [because] that was the way it was, that was the district we lived in, and that's where he had to go to school, and that's where he went to school. But a lot of people continue to put that inside and they resent it over the years.

WL: Did the--how long did it take in the case of, well, Jackson School--that was a middle school?

LM: Yes. It's a middle school now. It was junior high then, grades] seven, eight, and nine. Seven, eight, nine.

WL: How long did it take before the--sort of the dust settled from the desegregation, the effect?

LM: I was there as an assistant principal for two years. And I would say that was somewhere in the neighborhood of '74--things were a lot calmer when I left--but probably '76, '77, before people had spent enough time being with each other--in other words, for the first grade classes to begin to move up. You know, we started getting kids that had been in integrated settings longer. And they knew they weren't going to kill each other off and they knew that--they'd been together and they'd seen each other and they played soccer together and they done this together, so it wasn't a major issue after a few years.

WL: Yeah. So three, four, five years?

LM: It takes a while to get some of those others out. And of course, the high schools I'm sure experienced a whole lot more [laughs] trouble than we did in the middle, junior high schools. Because these kids are only going to be together two or three years and they'd been in completely black settings prior to that time, or completely white settings. So it was tough being an administrator at that time.

WL: What would--you mentioned some of the specific things that administrators would have to be concerned with. In the case of cheerleaders, that would be obviously very important.

LM: Oh yes.

WL: What specifically did you work out with the cheerleaders?

LM: The system did special regulations so that we could guarantee certain kinds of representation on the squads--racial representation. And of course that pleased some and angered others. [Whites said], "Why are you guaranteeing when they're not as good as?" And blacks on the other hand, "Why do we have but so many? Why can't we have?"

But what we did also was to get a group called Student School Board Action Group, a group that met with the school board. These were kids from all the schools. And they vented and brought their problems. And there were a couple of other groups--student groups, student affairs groups--who listened to and met on a system-wide basis. And who also met in their individual school systems or schools themselves and people from central office were assigned the job of going out and talking with these youngsters, helping them process with some of this. We had help from the state department. They also sent Dudley Flood, who was real good at helping kids to understand and that helped a lot.

WL: These would be interracial groups, sort of? As opposed to black students' and white students' committees?

LM: Oh, yes. Rarely did we have just the black and white student committees. We did have that at various times on certain issues, but most of the time our thing was to keep everybody integrated. And for people to be able to say what they wanted to say.

WL: What about other sorts of activities in the schools, aside from cheerleading? Obviously there's sports teams--

LM: The cheerleading, the sports teams. In high school the homecoming courts--really, really touchy, because black girls aren't supposed to be pretty in the minds of some folks. White girls are supposed to be silly and they're not pretty because they're not black in the

minds of blacks. So there were racial quotas for all those things. Anything that you had to have anything for, there was a policy covering it and it was written and this was the way it was going to be.

WL: Have those sorts of things remained?

LM: No.

WL: So at some point there was a decision made that this isn't necessary anymore?

LM: It's not necessary anymore. Just kind of--they just kind of dropped by the wayside.

WL: Nobody noticed?

LM: Nobody noticed.

WL: New school year began and--

LM: Right.

WL: In retrospect, how do you--how well do you think that desegregation has worked? What have been the busts and benefits of desegregation? Say beginning from 1971 onward?

LM: It's given kids a better picture of what the real world is like. They, in their daily living, will have to experience each other. And I think they've gotten a better feel for life situations, that it's not all black or white. It can be black at times or white at times or a complete mixture. But they have gotten a good feeling of the fact that things are not just one way. There are lots of ways that things can be and that that's not wrong or right. It's just that that's the way it is. And so I think it prepares them more for life.

And in Greensboro, in particular, we not only have just streets with black/white, we have lots of other groups of people who have moved into the area that youngsters have been exposed to, and I'm hoping that's helped them to feel a little more open and to have more--at least an open-minded attitude about things. There are problems, there are always problems. But we now care more about economic issues, per se, than we do about always racial issues. A lot of it is combined with economics. Race is a factor, a big factor, but we hear a lot of the haves versus the have-nots.

WL: Cutting across racial lines?

LM: Cutting across racial lines.

WL: For example, you have one?

LM: Yeah. We have a small Native American population that characteristically are very low paid people. We have a lot of youngsters from single parent homes who may be black or white, but who, because of the single parent, and usually it's the mother--and of course that means that the income is going to 99 percent of the time be lower than if the parent was the father, the children with the father--a lot of broken home situations, a lot of youngsters in foster care. And we have other racial groups coming in with a lot of refugee children who are poor.

WL: Does--what do you foresee for the future, I mean in terms of Greensboro, specifically? I mean in terms of the way this system has evolved? With what we have in 1988, it's still pretty much what was created in 1971, in terms of--

LM: That's right.

WL: --of course a lot of it depends on the courts, I suppose. But what's your opinion--

LM: I think basically we will continue with Greensboro Public Schools pretty much as we have in the past. We're instituting new programs to try to address the needs of multicultural education, to provide options for parents and magnet school programs, to be sure that curriculum and other activities are standardized, that you get the basic same kinds of grades in any school that you go into. And we are looking very carefully at many of our "have-not" youngsters, with federal funded programs, with locally funded programs, to be conscious of their needs, and to provide really the best possible education for any youngster, regardless of race or economic status.

[End of Interview]