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William Henry Chafe Oral History Collection

INTERVIEWEE: Lewis Brandon

INTERVIEWER: William Chafe

DATE: July 1978

[Note: Claude Barnes enters the room at the end of the interview and can be heard on tape.]

WILLIAM CHAFE: You came—you came back to Greensboro in—was it the fall of ‘66?

LEWIS BRANDON: Yeah, September.

WC: You’d already graduated from school right?

LB: Yeah, I came back to work on my master’s degree.

WC: Which was in biology?

LB: Biology, right.

WC: When you came back, what kinds of things were going on?

LB: Not much of anything in terms of—well, I can’t say that because on campus there was a group called—it was a student group, and I can’t remember. I’m looking for the name now. But they were involved with things like fiscal affairs at the university, particularly around the budget item, and A&T [North Carolina A&T State University] not being able to get money for—

WC: SOUL[?], Students Organized for —

LB: SOUL.

LB: Yeah. Okay, this is a paper that we did and circulated.

WC: Right, right. That was basically around the issue of A&T being discriminated against in appropriations.

LB: In terms of appropriations, yeah. So what we did was organize a support—I mean a rally in support of Dr. [Lewis C.] Dowdy and asked for more monies.

WC: Was that involved primarily on campus or did that involve—?

LB: That was on campus. That really—most of my activities at that point were focused on campus, with the exception of voter registration and working with the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People]. I had no real contact with the community other than in terms of CORE [Congress of Racial Equality]. Oh, I did get involved in OEO [Office of Economic Opportunity] at that point. Of course, CORE did have a seat on the board of OEO. This is the fellow you were asking about, Richard—he's the one who was arrested with Eric Brown.

WC: Who was what?

LB: Arrested with Eric Brown.

WC: Ah, I see. Okay, because his name keeps coming up in the *[Carolina] Peacemaker*, and I didn't know who he was. Is that—in the *Peacemaker* spelled it's with a B. [Bision?] is it?

LB: No, it starts with—yeah, [Vision?]

WC: [Vision?] was the name, okay. That's interesting. He then was here just for one year, right, or two years at the most?

LB: Yeah, one year.

WC: Did anyone think that he was Communist Party?

LB: Not really. I mean, you know, the rumors, but I don't think anybody really looked into it.

WC: Yeah, right. Had GUTS started at that time when you came back?

LB: GUTS, GUTS—what is that?

WC: Greensboro United Tutorial Service. It seems to be the predecessor of YES [Youth Educational Service]?

LB: They were in existence, and that's when I began to—that's when I met Nelson [Johnson]. Because some of the things that we were doing on campus relative to the money thing and the ROTC [Reserve Officer Training Corps]—and Nelson came to one of the meetings. But it was in existence.

WC: And Nelson was with GUTS at that point? He was—

LB: Yeah.

WC: So would that have been right after you came back?

LB: [Nineteen] sixty-six, sixty-seven.

WC: Okay. What were you doing with ROTC?

LB: Well, the thing, you know, ROTC was mandatory on campus. And thing was to get it out [unclear] or either to make it non-mandatory. There were some rallies and some boycotts—well not boycotts, but some rallies and picketing of, you know, their drills, the weekly drills.

WC: So every boy had to take it? Every male had to take that?

LB: Yes.

WC: But the girls weren't—the women students weren't in?

LB: No, it wasn't required of them.

WC: Right. You say CORE had a seat on OEO. Was OEO, at that point, a fairly activist body, or does it became more so later on?

LB: It really wasn't that actively involved. Actually, there was another person on the seat. B.J. Battle. And B.J. and I began to work on some things. One was the pay scale of black employees and white employees and the fact that there was none in the—at that point there weren't any in supervisory positions or any positions of leadership. And one of the things was that we got together and worked out the—that information, and I made a

presentation. I raised a question at a board meeting about that, and from that point on we began to kind of challenge them to do something.

WC: This was an OEO board meeting?

LB: Right. I succeeded B.J. on the board, and at that point we began to—I guess the position became a little more militant because—

WC: Was that when Allen was—?

LB: Van Allen[?] was assistant director, and a fellow by the name of Paul [Khazan?] was the director. He resigned a few months—he may have resigned before I got on the board.

WC: And then Charles Davis came on?

LB: Well, no, we had a big fight because what they did, they went north and hired a white fellow to be the director, and we fought that. I've got some pictures somewhere I'll be able to find and show you. But we put up a big fight about that, and in fact stopped him from coming in. And that was when Charles Davis came in as the director.

WC: That was the major victory for the community?

LB: That was a major victory for the community. That was the first time something like that happened, particularly around OEO.

WC: By the time that happens, a lot of other things had already happened in the schools and the community as well, right?

LB: Well, that was—well, I was looking at this. This was one of the community activities that was going on, the Poor People's March.

WC: Now this is in the spring of '68, right?

LB: Was it? Yeah, somewhere in there.

WC: So [phone rings], since Nelson Johnson was—[unclear], was he a marshal? Did he coordinate the—

LB: He was one of the coordinators, yeah. I think there were some other people involved in it, but I know he was one of the key people.

WC: Right. One of the senses I have of this is that the ’67-‘68 period is kind of organization and mobilization, but not a great deal of overt demonstration.

LB: No, no.

WC: So that YES is organizing the community around the housing issue, the SOUL group is organizing around the issue of the university finances, but there’s not what you would call focused or mass demonstrations, anything like that?

LB: No, not really. [pause] Can you cut this off?

WC: Sure.

[Recording paused]

WC: Was YES an OEO funded organization or was that independent?

LB: I’m not sure where YES got their finances from, because they might—YES was prior to OEO’s existence. I’m not sure exactly where they got—there might have been some state funding. North Carolina Fund, I think, probably was where they got their money from. Because out of the North Carolina Fund grew the Foundation for Community Development [FCD], which brought the interns into Greensboro in the summer of ’68, which was the forerunner for GAPP [Greensboro Association of Poor People].

WC: Right. Now the interns came in from all over the state or all over the country?

LB: I know at least most of them were from around the state. Now, some of them might have been from outside of the state.

WC: And after the summer of ’68, that was when GAPP started?

LB: Yes, because of the organizational structure they had been set up in terms of community—well, there was another group called UNIT.

WC: Right

LB: United Neighborhood [Improvement Team]—so a lot of those people were taken. There was a name change from UNIT to GAPP. But there had been a basic neighborhood

structure set up already, and these people had sent members to GAPP as—to be the board members.

WC: So that each intern might have worked in a separate neighborhood structure, and then representing that structure, those people would be kind of a federation which formed GAPP.

LB: Yeah. They formed the initial board of directors of GAPP.

WC: So that GAPP really was a representative organization with another whole layer of organization below it?

LB: Yeah, community structure. And then there were some people who were voted at-large because of their activities in the community. That's how Barbara [McNamara?] came on, she came on as an at-large person.

WC: Were most of the—so the interns that came in, they would live in the community and they'd work with the community on the issues of that neighborhood, right?

LB: Yes. But the key thing was, not—well, they would work on the issues in the neighborhood, but what the idea was was to find those kinds of issues that not only affected that neighborhood, but affected other neighborhoods. Because the thing—the base of that was the use of mass power, the power of the people, and mobilizing people around common issues.

WC: Right. Would the interns have been here all summer?

LB: What?

WC: The interns would have been here all summer long?

LB: Yeah.

WC: Would there have been a focus on neighborhoods which were poor rather than middle-class?

LB: Well, the focus then was on basically slum areas. I guess the reason [is] there were poor people, basically. Most of these people were in slum areas and in housing projects, housing developments.

WC: Now so like Hampton Homes and places like that?

LB: I mean what you see there on Bennett Street behind Bennett College, that new development, all that was just slum of the worst kind. Where Cosmo's is, those were shanties, dirt streets and things. And that's where a lot of the organization took place, in areas like that. See, redevelopment has really cleaned out most of this area. But there were a lot of dirt streets in Greensboro, a lot of streets with no street lights, that kind of thing.

WC: Right. Would most of the interns have been college students?

LB: Yeah, some of them were and some weren't. Some people who had been involved in other kinds of demonstrations and sort of gravitated toward FCD, or probably had been involved in with the North Carolina Fund. But all of them were not college graduates.

WC: Was—

LB: Now the other thing is they operated all across the state.

WC: Okay, that's—

LB: Let's see, Fayetteville, Durham—see, there was Fayetteville Area Poor People's Organization. There was Wilson Improvement Organization. The names might not be that accurate—but Wilson, Rocky Mount, Tarboro area, there was a group. And then Durham had a group, and Greensboro.

WC: So that this was really a spreading out all over the state of FCD organizing, basically, to focus on community issues in neighborhoods.

LB: Right.

WC: Now by that time—were you already more involved in that kind of activity by that time than you had been earlier?

LB: No, I was not involved with the interns. I knew them and I had some relationship with them, but that actual work during the summer, I was not involved in. I was still kind of into activities that were related to NAACP and voter registration, that kind of thing.

WC: Now, one of the things, I guess, that—trying to measure the impact of Dr. [Martin Luther] King's assassination—what kinds of, you know—was that a major transforming

force in the community in terms of activism, or had much of what later developed already started by that time?

LB: Well, the—yeah, in a sense, because what it did, a lot of people who had not been involved in any—really active in any kind of movement since the sit-ins, because of the King assassination and the position that the city took in reference to some community leaders—like there was a meeting with Reverend [Otis] Hairston and some other people to try and organize a [unclear] and the city said no, and that really pulled people together.

WC: So that in that sense, it revitalized what had been there before?

LB: Yeah, in a lot of people who had sort being lying dormant in terms of activity.

WC: How about the students?

LB: Yeah, the students came out, but that was—because there was activity going on on campus around SOUL and then YES and then there was the Orangeburg massacre [at South Carolina State University]. Students were up about that, and there were a number of rallies and marches around that. [pause] I mean I'm not sure; shortly after that, what, the Jackson State [University] murders at Jackson State. So on campus, see, there was—because Nelson was there, there were a lot of political kinds of activity and organizing.

WC: Now, Nelson Johnson at this point was not a student, but became one and then was elected—

LB: No, he was a student.

WC: He was a student at that point? Okay, so he was both a student and working with YES?

LB: Yes.

WC: Okay. Now—

LB: If I'm not mistaken, his introduction through YES was because of his ties to one of his teachers who was involved in it.

WC: So after the King assassination, it would have been an acceleration of activity probably?

LB: Yeah, because at that time GAPP was pretty well on its way.

WC: GAPP, yeah—so GAPP starts in the fall of ’68, right after that summer intern program?

LB: Yeah.

WC: Okay. Now how does GAPP operate in terms of the campus?

LB: Well, it’s only real connection is through Nelson and Tom [Bailey], at this point. Well, Tom was not really the direct person; there was one person before him. Tom was a student. And the fellow [Walter Brame?] was the first director.

WC: So Nelson did not—he was the founder, but not the first president of GAPP?

LB: You mean the director of GAPP.

WC: So—

LB: There was a difference between being the director and president, chairman of the board.

WC: Right.

LB: At this point we had a funded organization. See the Foundation funded the organization which means they had an executive director and a staff of community workers.

WC: Now—

LB: Nelson may have worked, you know, until Walt got here; I’m not sure.

WC: Right. Walter Brame was not a student, is that right? He was—

LB: Yeah, he had graduated from [North Carolina] Central [University].

WC: Okay. And so he then became director?

LB: Now Nelson was a, at some point, a field coordinator with the Foundation.

WC: For FCD, yeah. Okay. That was probably the summer—

LB: But he was working for them that summer when they organized, and he had charge—he had probably supervised the field workers—I mean the interns in this area.

WC: Right, and that was the same year that he was getting ready to be vice president of the student body.

LB: Right, somewhere around that time.

WC: Was he—I was just trying to think, was he was vice president of the student body fall of ’68 or was—

LB: Whenever Vincent McCullough was president, he was the—

WC: I think that was the spring ’69, actually.

LB: Yeah, ’68-’69 school year.

WC: Yeah. I guess I’m mixed up because there was a Calvin Matthews[?] or something like that who was president before McCullough.

LB: Wait a minute now. No, Nelson was with Calvin Matthews, if I’m not mistaken, but there was still a relationship with Vince. But it was Nelson and Calvin Matthews, which means that would have been ‘67-’68, or somewhere along there.

WC: I’ve got to get those dates straighten out, because—it’s not all that important, but it’s just for accuracy. Now my understanding is that Nelson and Tom both had as their goal forging an alliance between the community and campus, and—

LB: Reestablishing?

WC: Okay, reestablishing.

LB: Because there always had been an alliance between the community and the university, because, in fact, the university at one point was the seat of all social and cultural activities in the community.

WC: Right. I was thinking more in terms of things like public housing issues and some other things that GAPP was involved in, [pause] which I guess weren’t necessarily new activities in terms of the community.

LB: When you say “forging an alliance,” in what respect?

WC: The sense of getting the students involved in community issues and community organization, that kind of thing.

LB: Okay, I think it was GAPP.

WC: More breaking down the sense of students being separate from the rest of the community.

LB: Right, that's accurate.

WC: Then there is the other question which gets introduced of student issues, strictly student issues, which were like dress rules, the whole thing with grades, teachers. What kind of background does that issue have? Was that a long-standing issue on campus that just—?

LB: I think, no, it's something that grew out of SOUL and some of the other activities that were going on on campus. There was always concern about the kinds of food that you get on campus, visiting privileges, that kind of thing. I think that was—that was just some of the kinds of things that students themselves were on campus. But I think people like Tom and Nelson and some other people had kind of a larger picture of what students ought to be involved in.

WC: They would be willing to use that kind of concern as a means of getting to the larger issues?

LB: Well, not necessarily, because, you know, being students, I mean, there is a kind of feel for that kind of thing, of what's happening on campus. I guess if anything, people saw those issues as kind of—as being kind of petty. I mean they were real issues, because that's what the students felt, but there were much larger concerns. And that people couldn't really—even though you're students, you really can't separate yourself from the community because you're part of the community. When you leave school, you have to back to the community. So, I mean, you ought to have a feel for those kinds of issues, and I think that's what people were trying to do. They were saying, "Yeah, okay. These issues are real and they're important, but there're some other issues that are important also and that we ought to address ourselves."

WC: One of the things that seemed a little bit—that I didn't understand too much when I was reading, was when Stokely Carmichael came in in the winter of '68, I guess, and made a speech at A&T, a very strong speech, and then there was a boycott of classes. But the boycott of classes seemed to have very little to do with the subject matter of the speech. And it had to do with—it seemed to have to do with things like the percentage of Fs on a transcript, getting them eliminated, getting some teachers reviewed who didn't seem to be

good teachers, and stuff like that. And I wondered whether—what, if any, recollection you have of that juxtaposition of those two things, the boycott and the Carmichael speech?

LB: At that point I was off the campus, so I was—I remember the speech. I think here again people used that momentum of that occasion to organize. And with all these rallies, people have to feel an urgency to do some things, and since you've got that built-in momentum, you might as well go ahead and use it. But, I mean, people were already talking about their Fs, and were already actively organizing, you know, and doing some things on campus. I mean it just didn't start after Stokely, but it was there. And they just used that to build upon.

WC: Right. But for a while, it seems that the focus that they were building on has to deal with campus issues only, because then there's the occupation of Dudley Hall [at A&T] over the question of—the same kinds of questions from February, again the naming of five or six instructors who should be looked into and things like that. And it seems that—my sense, at least, is it's not until the cafeteria workers strike that there is a direct connection to some of these larger issues that you're talking about. Would that seem to be very true?

LB: Well, see, the thing was, because of the organizing and being involved in the student [encounters?], the concerns of the students, it was easy to transfer that momentum to what was going on in the community.

WC: The student issues.

LB: From the student issues to what was going on in the community.

WC: Right, right. Okay. Were you there the day of the memorial service, the Malcolm X memorial service at the community center when the police came and lobbed the tear gas canister?

LB: I got there about ten minutes after, fifteen minutes after that happened. That was in '69.

WC: [Nineteen] sixty-nine, yeah. March '69.

LB: I was working in the public school system. I had just gotten there about that time when people were dispersing. Then we marched back to Bennett campus.

WC: Was there a lot of anger at that point?

LB: Yeah.

WC: Had there been any indication that—had anything happened that you either heard about or can remember before that tear gas was used?

LB: I think it was probably carelessness on the part of the police officers. I think one of the canisters got away from them, or probably another situation where someone was trying to provoke them. But that was a big—that raised a whole other question about—in which we, GAPP, began to take up the thing of, at this point, riding around with these shotguns very visible in the car. But, as I recall, if you read some of the accounts, it really wasn't an accident. It was a direct—it really was an attempt to provoke a situation, and there really wasn't any real cause for that.

WC: And it didn't succeed in—

LB: In provoking people, no, because people were able to—I mean people who organized were able to maintain control of it. And what happened is that we left there and marched back to Bennett's campus.

WC: Supposedly, during this time—February, March, April—before the episode at Dudley and then the national guard coming in, this is when Nunding [b. Harold Avent] is here, right?

LB: Yeah, somewhere in that time frame. Were you able to find anything on—

WC: No, I haven't. I will though. I haven't searched through the microfilm yet.

LB: Yeah, it's somewhere in—yeah, because at that point that I was in the public school system; he came in the fall of the year. It was the fall of sixty—no, it couldn't have been '68.

WC: Yeah, I think it probably was.

LB: It was '68, fall of '68.

WC: Yeah. What kinds of things made people suspicious about him?

LB: [pause] Well, in talking to him, you know, he had a highly—well, he was intelligent, very intelligent, but I mean he had seen a lot of things, done a lot of things that's quite uncommon to black folks. Folks felt that he had access to information that you just don't

normally have access to. One of the biggest—one of the things was his insistence on organizing a Black Panther Party, that kind of thing, and people were really not into being a Black Panther.

WC: He was the one who insisted on organizing the party?

LB: Yeah, he was going to organize their party. I mean they were—Eric had already said that he was one of the Panthers.

WC: But he hadn't gotten that much support.

LB: His base had really been on campus—Eric's base, that is. Nunding was trying to build a base in the community.

WC: Would—did he do things which were the kinds of things a provocateur would do?

LB: Some of the things he did—he was the regular guy, the buddy-buddy type, you know. He would buy a lot of wine and drink it and try to get the fellows to drink wine and stuff like that. People weren't into that. He wanted—he introduced pot, and people weren't into that. Those were the kinds of things and some other things that made people being to look at him. Of course, all the people who kind of revolved around him, like Nelson and Green and all them, had real hard lines; they had real hard lines about dope and stuff, particularly dope.

WC: Would Nunding have ever suggested doing something illegal besides smoking or drinking?

LB: He probably would. I wouldn't—the only thing is I don't have that kind of—but I wouldn't put it past him.

WC: I don't know if you saw the TV show last night on ABC where they were talking about Gary Thomas Rowe and the FBI informant who probably pulled the trigger on Mrs. [Viola] Liuzzo and probably planted the bomb at the Birmingham [Alabama, 16th Street Baptist] Church and did this while he was working for the FBI. That seems to me were the kinds of things coming out.

LB: I think, you know, when you read those articles on Nunding, there might be some suggestions that he suggested some things.

WC: But people like Nelson Johnson and Walter Brame were not into the Panther—

LB: No, no. That mentality, no, particularly not into organizing a Panther chapter.

WC: Now who would bring over the Panthers from Winston-Salem? Who would invite them over?

LB: That's probably Eric.

WC: Did he have a substantial base on campus, support on campus?

LB: Not really.

WC: So that Nelson and Vincent McCullough [phone rings] would have had more of a supportive base?

LB: Yeah, no question about that.

WC: Now at this point are you teaching in public schools?

LB: Yeah.

WC: Which one?

LB: J.C. Price [Junior High School]. It was a high—it was a—

WC: Junior high?

LB: Yeah, junior high school.

WC: Swann was the principal?

LB: Mr. Peeler, A.H. Peeler, was the principal when I went there, and then Mel[vin] Swann succeeded him.

WC: And what kind of sense was there about the school system at that point, and what it was doing?

LB: Basically, you see, there was still a dual system in Greensboro. I can remember only one black—I mean white student at Price during my tenure there. Most of the kids that we got

were from the housing development. And people were about teaching; I mean there was nothing else really going on. In my way, I kind of tried to force some things.

WC: Tried to force—

LB: You know, some of the—some activities on some of the people there, either through dialogue or trying to get them having various kinds of programs. Each person was responsible for having an assembly, each instructor, and so when I had mine, I had—by that time we were into Pan-Africanism, and I had [Dr. Moses] Musa Kamara come over and do a program. I got one of the others instructors to do some things around black personalities in one of his classes—he was a social science teacher—[unclear] with a lot of dialogue in and whatnot, and I provided him with materials that I had collected.

The other thing, we were involved in the cafeteria workers strike, so there was some dialogue—

WC: Was this the citywide cafeteria workers, the school cafeteria workers?

LB: Yeah. I was working in the school system when that came along, and the whole thing about trying to get teachers not to buy lunches but rather bring their lunches from home in support of the workers. It was at this point that I made the decision to leave the public schools because of some pressures that was coming up with down from the police department, and then through the superintendent, like why was my car being seen at other schools—

WC: Why your car was being seen at other schools?

LB: Yeah. A question about where—well, really where I was during the day, because the strikers were using my car to transport people to pickets.

So at that point Nelson was leaving FCD as field organizer and that position was available.

WC: He was leaving what as a field organizer?

LB: He was leaving the Foundation for Community Development as the organizer, so I took over after he—after he, you know.

WC: The police department seems to have been very good at following license numbers.

LB: Well, there was this whole thing downtown one afternoon with Nelson and his wife and I. We were paying bills and we came around and we parked. I went in and come out. This

guy had pulled up behind us, this officer had pulled up behind us and asked me not to move the car. And there was two—because when we came around the corner, he was there talking to two other officers, and so they were walking up the street. It took them so long I thought I'd just pull on off, and he got upset. "I told you not to move the car." So we sat there, and then he came up and said, "Mr. Brandon, may I see your driver's license?"

I said, "If you know my name, why do you want to see my driver's license?"

He said, "Just give me your driver's license."

So I went to open the door, you know, "Don't get out of the car."

And I just decided I was going to get out anyway. I told him that this was harassment. And he said, "You can call it anything you want to call it."

He proceeded to check around the car, to check the tires, look under the car. And what he was really doing was looking for something that he could give me a citation for. But by that time, Nelson had gone to call one of the attorneys, and so they decided at that point that they probably better leave us alone. They gave me my license back.

But then two days after that, the superintendent called Mel Swann and wanted to know what my car was doing at Page [High School] and asked him did he know where I was. And Mr. Swann said, "Yeah, he's downstairs."

"Are you sure?"

"Sure, he's downstairs."

So I decided that I wasn't going to be subjected to that kind of thing. In fact, since I had a position coming, I thought I'd get out.

WC: That was what, like the summer of '69—summer of '70, probably.

LB: Yeah.

WC: The year after that—after the A&T cafeteria workers—

LB: Yeah, because I only worked in the public schools a year and a half.

WC: So it was right after that that Swann got named—got assistant superintendent or something like that.

LB: The following year.

WC: The following year, then. Let's just see if this is—well, my timing is pretty good. I've got about another three minutes, five minutes.

LB: It's really kind of interesting because on the negotiating team, B. J. Battle and I went with the workers, and we had to go before the board of education. [phone rings] And it had to have been, you know, school teachers sitting up there arguing on the behalf of the cafeteria workers. They really wanted to put us out. In fact, insisted—the board insisted that we leave, but the workers said, "No, no. They're here with us."

WC: Was there any one on that board who you thought was an ally?

LB: That was an ally? At that point, no, not really.

WC: Not until—

LB: I really don't remember who was on the board.

WC: Evans, no.

LB: No, there weren't any blacks on the board at that point. He was all right.

WC: Was—I guess it was the year after that Walter Johnson went on.

LB: Yeah, something like that.

WC: When the whole thing came down at A&T when Willie Grimes was killed, is there anything—what was the sense in the community of what had happened there? Was there pretty much widespread conviction that it had been the police who'd done it?

LB: Yeah, I think that's accurate. That's accurate. All indications, everything pointed to the fact that the police had done it. I think that's one of the reasons that Webb pushed for an investigation of the—A. S. Webb was—

WC: Right.

LB: —the managing officer at American Federal. It might be—you might want to talk to him. He pushed—B. J. Battle was there also. But he pushed for that investigation and organized the committee and really pulled people together to do that; to asked for them to come in. Another thing was that Webb and Battle were the two people who sponsored the interns that came in to work that summer of '67.

[pause]

WC: All right. One of the—I guess one of the questions is—and I'm not sure there's any answer to it—but to what extent there was—I've heard the Black Liberation Front [BLF] would have been involved in some of the snipings. And what I don't know, I guess, is: A) whether that's true and B) how widespread it was?

LB: Well, I really couldn't—now which Black Liberation Front?

WC: This would have been the group associated with Eric Brown.

LB: Well, they had long been gone from the campus.

WC: They were gone from campus?

LB: Long gone.

WC: They were arrested, I know, in March.

LB: There were people who were a part of that Liberation Front didn't stay more than a year, so those people weren't even there. You're really talking about almost a three-year—yeah, three years.

WC: Three years from—?

LB: From the time that the Black Liberation Front was active; that was in '66.

[End of Tape One, Side A—Being Tape One, Side B]

LB: [unclear] one of—he's president of an organization called the Greensboro Citizens Association [GCA], and I and some more people were standing out in front of the GAPP headquarters. And here [are] police cars sitting out watching us in the parking lot, and then these jeeps are driving all over, not only down in front of the place, but they're all up on—over near Smith Homes and other places. I really thought it was uncalled for. Really, that really provoked an unnecessary situation. It wasn't—I don't think it was an emergency to a point where they had to call in troops. So I think things just sort of snowballed from there.

WC: Same thing was true in '68. There was no need for the guard [unclear].

LB: That was true. You're talking about overreaction. That was it.

WC: Someone like Captain [William] Jackson says that.

LB: That overreaction?

WC: Yeah.

LB: Did he say that? That was off the record, though?

WC: No, he said—yeah, he did say it off the record. He said it off the record. But he also said off the record that they would not let him go near the situation because they—he in fact was not involved in—he was involved at Dudley, but he was not involved at all in the national guard operation at A&T. And he basically said he thought they totally botched it.

LB: There's always been the feeling that certain elements of the police department had a point to prove, and that the city in general was always trying to make examples of people in situations. Because when we got to these garbage workers, when they were out on strike, when they fired on people, there was really no reason to do that. But the feeling is and the conclusion that people come to is that since that Dudley situation and the report of the Civil Rights Commission, that whenever they can be very vindictive, they were going to do that. Because when the first [referendum on sheriff funds?] came down, we had a hearing about that. Because people were really concerned about them spending three hundred thousand dollars on police weapons, just on hand guns. And there was nothing to really that you could do to keep them from spending that money. There were a lot of things that the community could use that three hundred thousand dollars for instead of buying these police guns.

WC: They didn't seem to be lacking for weapons.

LB: Oh, no, because right after that '69 thing, you know, I mean they really prepared themselves in terms of fire power.

WC: I mean in some ways I think they called out the guard in '68 after Dr. King's assassination basically because they had a plan and they wanted to see if the plan worked.

LB: See if they could mobilize.

WC: Yeah. I mean they had a contingency plan and [snaps] bang, here it was.

LB: It was really—it was really—well, it got to be kind of hilarious. Because see, the thing at Dudley in the first place did not have to happen. Because about three weeks before or two

weeks before the thing happened, there was a number of us meeting trying to solve that problem. I went to a couple—when I heard the thing, I went to a couple of people's house—oh, I called the NAACP and mentioned it to them. So their guy said, "Okay, we'll make you the chairman of the education committee and let you go out and investigate things." So I went to talk to the people, and I went to one who was the president of the student body at Dudley at that time, and he was very shaken. And his mother really didn't want him talking to me because he was up for a scholarship and she didn't want anything to jeopardize him from getting his scholarship and going ahead to school. Then I went by one of the teachers involved house, and they invited me out of the house. So I mean that was the level, that kind of activity.

But then I remember one night we were having this meeting at Rev. Hairston's church, and when we showed up, man, there was so much police surveillance there.

WC: This was before the whole thing—

LB: Oh, it was probably—

WC: —hits the fan?

LB: Oh, yeah, I mean weeks, a couple of weeks before. Because people were working, trying to iron out the problems, trying to get city officials, trying to get school officials to sit down and discuss it. And we had this meeting over at Shiloh, and maybe in talking to one of the policemen who was there during the surveillance, he said police intelligence had said that there was a bunch of militants that would be meeting at this church. And so while he was sitting there—he was just a patrolman—he said he counted forty-one different cars, police cars coming through the area. Now, you're at Shiloh Baptist Church, right? You've got people like Ezell Blair, Sr., you got ministers from other churches, you know, other civic and lay leaders in the community, but they are under police surveillance. [phone rings]

WC: Just send someone into the meeting, right?

[Recording paused]

WC: What's he doing now?

LB: Well, now he is working in the Upward Bound program. He's in charge of the counselors out at UNCG [The University of North Carolina at Greensboro]. But he's also in school at A&T.

WC: He's in school at A&T as well? I should try to talk to him if I can. But go ahead. You were saying you were involved in meetings trying to solve a truce before—

LB: A couple, yeah, before it came off.

WC: Had—

LB: And this was not only—GAPP really was at the spearhead of this, with the assistance of some other community people, in trying to reach a solution to the problem. In fact, [we] thought that we were making headways with that.

WC: And what got in the way? What made it impossible?

LB: One was the attitude of the school board and the fact that they sent a non—well, the guy who they sent over there really relieved [principal Franklin] Brown of his duties. They sent—what's that fellow's name? He was public—

WC: Owen Lewis.

LB: Owen Lewis over there and really complicated the situation. [He was] a guy who really could not relate to and did not try to relate to the students in that particular situation and really complicated the problem. These are the simple things [unclear]. It was Claude Barnes. There was no reason to exclude him from the matter, because he was a kid who had been everything you can think of, you know, in the school—all kinds of awards, junior achievement award, that kind of thing, honor student. And then all of a sudden, because he belongs to a youth group that happened to be sponsored by GAPP, he's now a subversive.

WC: Right. You know what's going to be hard for me to do?

LB: What's that?

WC: Seriously, it's going to be hard for me to write this in a way which shows how paranoid people were. It's hard to believe, retrospectively, how paranoid they were. I mean it really is. I mean how much they saw conspiracy everywhere, under every single—

LB: Yeah, because I—thinking back, there were a number of meetings at churches. Because one of the first meetings we had was at a Trinity AME, that was a Methodist church. We brought in all the families—we brought some of the parents in from the school and sat down and tried to talk about what kind of problems and how we could solve the

problems. And then there were a number of other meetings in the community, and then the one at Shiloh just struck me because of all the police surveillance.

WC: Yeah. Did you talk to Brown about it? What did Brown say?

LB: No, I never did talk to him, but there were attempts to have dialogue with him. But the thing was that Owen Lewis always got in between, because actually the administration took over the running of the campus in this particular instance. I don't recall if Brown made any statements or not at this point, public statements. I think all of them were made by Owen Lewis.

WC: It's amazing. It really is. Let me shift a little bit, if I can. Am I taking too much time?

LB: No.

WC: Let me ask you about the [Greensboro] Chamber of Commerce and the Community Unity Council.

LB: I have no connection with that. I knew people who were on the council, but no real ties, no real connection with the chamber. I don't think I was invited to participate. I know a lot of people who did, and I probably would not be the type of person they would have wanted on the Community Unity Council.

WC: Why would that be?

LB: Well, I think they were kind of looking for people who kind of represented their view point, and I didn't necessarily do that. And they probably didn't want people who were going to raise issues or raise questions that they were not ready to deal with.

WC: Did you—what was the general—how would opinion have divided in the community, the black community, as you saw it dividing, over someone like Hal Sieber?

LB: Who have you talked to about people's opinion of Sieber? Sieber was a real snake in the grass.

WC: In what sense?

LB: Devious. He used people in the community to get information. Talking about some of the things the CIA [Central Intelligence Agency] and the FBI had done, you know, Sieber had done some of those things and trying to buy information from the community.

WC: What kind of—how would that happen?

LB: Well, like using women to get information from people.

WC: Women that he would then have relationships with?

LB: Yeah. Providing monies to other people so that they could do disruptive kinds of things.

WC: You saw him using those love or those—you're talking about sex relationships, now?

LB: Yes.

WC: Using those for political purposes?

LB: Well, I think what he was trying to do is, he wanted—he or the chamber needed to be on top of what was going on in the community; [he] really wanted to know what the black community was doing, and he resorted to that. See, one time—Hal had this thing about, if a meeting went on in the community, he was supposed to be there, and we barred him from meetings. So then he had to get information other ways. But in a lot of quarters in the black community, the people thought he was the greatest thing that existed, because here again he was doing favors.

WC: I've heard very mixed things. I'm not surprised. [laughs]

LB: You've heard some very mixed things?

WC: Yeah. But obviously he was—he had strong ties with [John Marshall Stevenson] Kilimanjaro.

LB: Yeah, in fact they became frat brothers.

WC: Right, which would have been at Kilimanjaro's initiative, right?

LB: Right.

WC: And seemed to have the same kind of ties with [Trinity AME Church minister] Cecil Bishop, and both men would be probably considered to be quite important people in the community with a fair amount of weight.

LB: Yeah, and he had some ties with people on the A&T campus, because he actually ended up working there after he left the chamber.

WC: Dowdy and—

LB: Dowdy and some other people on campus.

WC: Would it be fair to say that—what was the breakdown? Was there any pattern of breakdown in opinion about him and the chamber? Would it be on a political spectrum, would it be generational, cultural?

LB: Well, probably political in our sense, because we understood—I think we probably—from our perspective it was political, because we were concerned about how the system did things in the community in terms of keeping people subjected to certain kinds of conditions. And so then there was a certain kind of analysis of kinds of things, activities that were going on, and people began to—people would look at, in trying to plan strategy and plan things, we had to look at how we were going to be—how things were going to be counteractive. But then in the other sense, people who liked him, the thing came basically from a social kind of thing, a thing of being accepted by white folks, being a part of the system, or thinking that one is a part of the system. Because a lot of these people held memberships in the chamber, but memberships that really didn't mean anything because most of these people weren't—particularly people coming from the educational institutions or non-business folks.

WC: So that those who were opposed to him would have seen him as being very clever about co-opting with the black community.

LB: That and—yeah, that and really trying to seek information that [pause]—particularly on things the chamber could use to get around some things that we were trying to do in the community.

WC: Such as?

LB: Housing, around employment, that kind of thing.
You can come on in. This is Claude Barnes, Bill Chafe.

WC: Hi. How are you?

CB: Good.

WC: Nice to see you.

LB: Bill is doing a—well, you can tell him better.

WC: Okay. I'm actually—we were just talking about 1969 at Dudley High.

CB: Oh. [laughs]

WC: I'm writing a book about thirty years of Greensboro history and focusing on both the sources of insurgency and the methods of control that have been used in the community. [I'm] basically trying to do a community study of what happens in one place over that period of time in the struggle for civil rights.

CB: That should be an interesting book.

WC: Well, it could be. [laughs] But we've just been talking about that spring, and I was just telling Lewis about having now read over, about eight times now, the accounts of that spring, and then having talked to a lot of people about it, and still not quite being able to believe some of the things that happened. [laughter]

CB: Yeah, it was quite unbelievable, man. I never could really adjust to it, all the things which happened to me.

[phone rings]

[End of Interview]