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William Henry Chafe Oral History Collection

INTERVIEWEE: Ike English

INTERVIEWER: William H. Chafe

DATE: n.d.

WILLIAM CHAFE: Are you a Greensboro native, Mr. English?

IKE ENGLISH: No, I'm a native of South Georgia.

WC: South Georgia. And how long have you been in Greensboro?

IE: Twenty-five years.

WC: Did you come with Burlington [Industries] at that point?

IE: Yes, right.

WC: Twenty-five years ago would be approximately the end of World War II to 1950.

IE: I spent three years in Buffalo [New York] right after World War II, and then came here.

WC: So you really came into the situation at a time when things were beginning to change in terms of the—

IE: Right at the beginning, right.

WC: —race relations. What was your perception of the community when you came into it? What was your feeling about the atmosphere here, about the general state of race relations?

IE: I felt that this was probably the most liberal community in the Southeast in this respect at the time I came here, having the Negro colleges in Greensboro, and—if you'll pardon the expression—high types in town. They seemed to have a place in the city already.

WC: So you already saw this as a press for movement was in progress in this area?

IE: Yes, I think it was already being accepted here when I came.

WC: Did you have any occasion during those, let's say, the early fifties—I realize it's hard to compartmentalize these dates so long afterward—but during the early fifties, any recollections of many encounters with black people?

IE: [pause] I frankly can't remember one way or the other. At the church, we were having some movement with them coming to services in the early fifties.

WC: Now, that was in West Market Street [United Methodist] Church? You joined this when you came?

IE: Right, right.

WC: Was Charlie—was Dr. Bowles there at that point?

IE: No. Gene Pugh[?], Dr. Pugh, was here at that point. Eventually Dr. Bowles came in, oh, the middle fifties.

WC: But there was already something going on in the church before Mr. Bowles came—Reverend Bowles came.

IE: Yes. There was already some movement, visiting groups, and a lot of resentment in the church to start with.

WC: It was?

IE: Yeah, to start with. Yeah.

WC: Where would these people be coming from? Is there a black Methodist church?

IE: Oh, of course. There are a lot of black Methodist churches. I don't know if they were coming from them or just the universities. I don't really know.

WC: Yeah. But these would be people coming in on Sunday morning and—

IE: Yeah, a few who were at first testing.

WC: Was there ever any effort to block them?

IE: No.

WC: Any discussion at any annual meetings of the church, or meetings of—

IE: No more than agreeing that we're still a Christian church, and as such, we'd seat them [where they wanted to sit?] That doesn't mean everybody in the church agrees with it. That was the official stand.

WC: Right. Did you have any—did you personally know at that time people on the school board who were—people like John Foster and Ed Hudgins—

IE: Yeah. [Good men?]

WC: You did know them—knew them personally as well as through any kind of professional means.

IE: Well, I knew them personally.

WC: Do you recall there being discussion—in perhaps a social occasion or a lunch or something like that—with these people about the impending problem, or, once the *Brown* [*v. Board of Education*] decision came, about the decision itself?

IE: I don't recall that I did. I may have, actually. I had a son in high school when the first black student [Josephine Boyd] attended, just one, and I recall it because he was traffic chief or whatever it was, sort of security. But it created [unclear] turned out.

WC: Was it—did he come home and say anything about what happened during that year when she was there? Any—

IE: No more than, "Nothing happened." It was made. It did not create the furor that was expected, as usual.

WC: Yeah. Did you have other children in—of course, that was the—

IE: Not in high school. He was several years older than our next child.

WC: Yeah, yeah.

IE: So by the time the others got there, it was pretty well accepted.

WC: How do you think he felt about the whole thing? Had he come out of a—

IE: He was fairly liberal in his views, like my wife and I.

WC: Would this be the kind of thing that the Methodist Youth Fellowship might have talked very about much?

IE: I would assume so. I don't recall. I'm sorry. I just don't have that good of memory.

WC: Sometimes the parents are active in those—you know, attend meetings sometimes and—

IE: I was not very active in that.

WC: Well, when the decision came down, of course, Greensboro responded fairly quickly in terms of its official stance—the board saying it would comply. I know this is hard for you to do, to put yourself back in that—

IE: That many years.

WC: —frame of reference, but you might recall that the board voted, by a vote of six to nothing, with Howard Holderness abstaining, to endorse the decision, to comply with it. And shortly thereafter, the Junior Chamber of Commerce [Jaycees] and the Greensboro Ministerial Association endorsed the board's action. Then there's a three year time period which elapsed between that endorsement of—or between that resolution of compliance and the desegregation which took place when Josephine Boyd went to [Greensboro] Senior High [now Grimsley]. And during that time, there was a lot of debate on the state level and on the community level, and then there was the Pearsall Plan. I wonder if you—if you recall any particular feelings you might have had around those events: the board's action, the Pearsall Plan, the debate which took place within Greensboro and the state on the question of desegregation.

IE: No, it—naturally, they were raging all sides of the thing at that time, and I'm—my wife and I were very moderate in our views. We certainly agreed that the head of the school district and everybody in it ought to go to the same school. We had plenty of friends on the other side, and plenty that wanted to go extreme the other way, of course. But I know that the superintendent of city schools at that time, Phil Weaver, and Dr. [Benjamin]

Smith ahead of him were under tremendous pressure—telephone calls from nuts, things like this, and they were browbeaten, and the rednecks really got out.

WC: Now, you said—

IE: But the community in general supported it, just like they did the—when they broke the restaurant seating bit. I remember my situation is a little bit different because I had lived in Pittsburgh and Buffalo for six years and I was accustomed to seeing them in a restaurant, so it didn't disturb me at all—and working with them. I had worked side by side with them. And then I was in the service for six years during that time, too, so again it was—even though I was from the redneck country of southwest Georgia, I was really a lot more liberal than most other people out there.

WC: I'm from the redneck country of Boston. [laughter]

IE: Isn't this a strange situation now?

WC: It is. It is.

IE: That the area that turned up their nose at the South now is worse than we were.

WC: Yeah.

IE: We did accept it. This is—in general, I suppose, I think the reason is that the South as I see it—and I know I don't see it in the same view everybody else does—but it's more law-abiding. Although you'll find more murders and things like that, [it's] generally more law-abiding than the other areas. Like when they demonstrated and all, everybody allowed them to do it. It wasn't any real problems with it going on here.

WC: Yeah. Where—you mentioned the redneck element in Greensboro. Where—how would you identify that in terms of—

IE: I'm just speaking of conservative people when I call them rednecks. I don't mean in the sense that I—when I said I was from redneck country, the former necessarily, but no particular area. You can go in any part—any community here, the wealthiest ones, and find some of the most liberal people and some of the most conservative.

WC: So it's not a socioeconomic thing?

IE: No, I don't think so. I wouldn't know how to [place it?]

WC: Would the—would that element of the community have any organizational kind of—

IE: No, they didn't have. Well, they tried to at that time to form one. I can't remember. Certainly now, there isn't one.

WC: Yeah. Would this become an issue of contention in your—you said that you had friends on all sides of the issue—is this something you would spend—which on a social evening you might spend lots of time talking about, or—

IE: Oh, yes. Naturally, [at] any kind of gathering, that was the main subject of conversation, like Watergate was here a while back.

WC: Yeah. But you managed to contain this within a fairly civilized—

IE: Yes. There was no fistfight going on. [laughter] Because I think most people knew, whether they would admit it or not, that it was accomplished. It wasn't anything—you could argue all you wanted to, but the Supreme Court had spoken. And most people, again, in the South would eventually accept it. They might fuss about it and threaten to lynch [Earl] Warren and the whole thing. That's just talk.

WC: Do you recall the Pearsall Plan itself and how you and your friends felt about that? It was Governor [Luther] Hodges that set up the Pearsall Commission and—

IE: Yeah, I remember that, but I don't even remember what they came up with. That's how vague it is for me.

WC: Well, it was a plan which—actually, it was two Constitutional amendments, one of which would've permitted any segment of the school district, in the event of desegregation, to petition for an election, a referendum, on whether to close the schools or not. And the second part of which was that it would be state aid available for tuition to private schools in cases where this kind of thing happened. And it was—

IE: Personally, I don't even remember what it was. That's how much it impressed me at the time.

WC: Would you think that the business leadership of the—how would you characterize the reaction of the business leadership of the community to desegregation of schools?

IE: You know, surprisingly, I think, most large businesses like Burlington are extremely liberal. I don't think people realize that. But I know some of my friends within the company—either now or have been—who were quite conservative, oh, almost bitter the way that large corporations were so liberal. So I think in general you would always find the larger corporations—

WC: So why do you think that was the case?

IE: Now you're getting into something I don't know. I'm just—I'm stating a fact that I hadn't thought of until it was pointed out to me by some of my very conservative friends.

WC: Was the leadership—

IE: Maybe they don't want to shake the boat. Maybe they don't want to buck the government. I don't know.

WC: The leadership of the—

IE: This whole community's leadership, I thought, came to the front on the whole thing and supported the—let's say the legal end of it, anyway, whether it was desegregating restaurants or schools.

WC: Did the act of demonstrations make any difference? Did that sort of go outside of—

IE: I don't really think so. As long as they kept them peaceful, I think nobody particularly minded, but they were all sort of a wasted effort. Again, Greensboro was really too conscious of this to have made a big deal out of it.

WC: So the demonstrations, you think, simply were—it would've happened anyway?

IE: I think so. Maybe they sped it up. I don't know.

WC: Did you know people who were on the [city] council at that time?

IE: I'm sure I did. I don't really remember who it was.

WC: I guess Ed Zane was one of those who was active on the city council.

IE: Yeah. And Ed was very active in quieting things down, too, and really negotiating with both sides. He was just—he was a strong leader. I told him we needed a few more like him.

WC: Yeah. Wasn't there a point at which you hired a black secretary?

IE: Yes, I had the first one in the company.

WC: Could you tell me a little bit about that?

IE: Well, I was asked if I would, and of course I readily agreed to it. It didn't bother me at all.

WC: Who asked you?

IE: Personnel.

WC: Personnel, I see.

IE: Yes, I was—I had a application—I mean, I had asked for another secretary, and they asked me would I accept a black one, and I told them sure. That part didn't bother me as long as she was qualified.

WC: Do you recall when that was exactly or approximately?

IE: The mid-fifties—late fifties, maybe. I know where the offices were. Let me think back. I would think the late fifties, just as a guess.

WC: Was this a breakthrough of sorts for Burlington?

IE: Yes, this was the first one. She was—I don't want to use this or not—she was qualified all right, but apparently—and I'm saying this apparently—she had never had anything, and so she immediately went out and bought automobiles and all kinds of things she couldn't afford. Bill collectors were knocking on our door, sheriffs and so forth. It was an unfortunate situation that the first one we got wasn't more stable.

WC: Did she stay very long? I guess in that case, she probably didn't.

IE: No, she went on back. She went on up to Washington.

WC: But Personnel obviously had some kind of long-range goals in mind and they had asked you. What kind—were there any great discussions beforehand that you were involved in?

IE: No. They just called and asked me if—said they had one and I would I accept. I just said, "Yes." That was about all [unclear].

WC: Was it something which a lot of people commented on?

IE: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. In fact, it was right amusing to me. The only two people in the engineering department at that time that resented it was a woman from Akron—that was originally from Akron, Ohio—and a man from out west. The Southerners accepted it—thought nothing about it. That was the amusing thing.

WC: And would it be shortly after that that this became a much more frequent practice throughout, at least as far as you could observe from—

IE: I think it was a while before the second one came in. It was just a matter, though, of finding qualified applicants, for they were actively trying to find them.

WC: Do you recall the person who was in charge of personnel at that time?

IE: Yeah. Bob—well, the one that talked to me was Bob Lincks.

WC: Links, L-i-n-k-s?

IE: C-k-s, I think.

WC: Okay.

IE: He's the one that actually hired her and—

WC: Is he still with—

IE: Yeah.

WC: —Burlington?

IE: Yeah. [pause] C-k-s. That's right. R-B.

WC: Good. In the church, I've gathered at least, that Dr. Bowles was somewhat controversial.

IE: He became that way as this racial issue became tense, but there was a relatively small group. They were vocal. But I think that basically Dr. Bowles was greatly admired and supported in the church.

WC: So that his leaving—

IE: He was there eight years.

WC: So his leaving had nothing to do with controversy over his stance.

IE: No, he had just been there that long.

WC: Would he preach frequently on this question?

IE: Yes.

WC: He would? So it was not unusual for him to get up and give a sermon on race relations?

IE: He didn't do it every Sunday.

WC: Right, but often enough so it wasn't a once a year kind of thing?

IE: Oh, no. Oh, no. He was a man, frankly, here to love people. I never saw anything like it. I don't mean just mankind, but every individual he ever saw.

WC: Were you fairly close to him?

IE: Yes. I was [only made?] pallbearer. I thought a lot of him.

WC: How would you—this is a difficult question, also—but how would characterize the response of other churches in the community to this situation?

IE: It varied all over the lot. You heard—I heard threats about—whether they were true or they were just mouthing words—that some churches had voted to take—bar the doors and not allow them in. This was when it first started. I don't know whether it was true or not, whether they actually did it or not, but I heard all kinds of threats that they would do things like that. Of course, it's so accepted now that none of the blacks ever come to our church. They just don't care. They'd rather be in their own, I imagine.

WC: Yeah.

IE: For a while, we had a delegation every Sunday at West Market. Might be a few people—you know, two or three or half a dozen.

WC: Yeah.

IE: It was resented by a few, but most people [unclear].

WC: Were you involved at all during these years in things like the Community Fund or the Y[MCA—Young Men's Christian Association] or groups like that which might have had some kinds of direct or indirect dealings with the question?

IE: No, I don't believe I was. I—the only thing I had to do with the Y, I used come down to some of the fund drives—not on the level where you'd be involved in that. I don't even recall that part of it.

WC: There was one—there was one confusing set of episodes which take place sometime in the fifties about swimming pools, and I've never been able to get it straight in my mind, so I keep on asking people [laughter] about it.

IE: I'll tell you what little I know about it.

WC: Okay.

IE: I only know what happened.

WC: Yeah, well that's—

IE: I don't know all the ramifications. Number one, when the—when the blacks appeared and wanted to swim, the city council closed the pools. It was just that simple. They closed the golf course, too. It was very shortsighted, but it's still what happened. It was such an uproar from some of the community. Of course, they later opened it back up again.

WC: After that happened, wasn't there something—didn't Mr. [Spencer] Love and Mr. [Caesar] Cone do something about another—about a—opening another pool?

IE: Yes. Mr. Love, I think, pretty well supported that Hayes-Taylor YMCA and kept the pool in operation—

WC: I see.

IE: —for it. They had [unclear] except the neighborhood pools. That's when the neighborhood pools sprang up all over town.

WC: Yeah, in the late fifties after that happened. That was the Lindley pool, something like that?

IE: Yes, Lindley Park.

WC: Lindley Park, yeah. That's always the—I—

IE: You're ashamed when you look back on some things.

WC: Well—

IE: But it's different. I think that's the main thing. It's something new, something different.

WC: Yeah.

IE: The community really wouldn't accept it just overnight.

WC: How would you—do you think that there's much cross-communication takes place now between blacks and whites, or more than in the past, or—

IE: I would assume so and hope so, in that all city committees or meetings or what have you, you get a lot more representation of black and white, so I would hope they talk to each other.

WC: Now, do they—for example, would you have much contact with the [North Carolina] A&T [State University] engineering department?

IE: No, I haven't.

WC: People aren't in—

IE: I haven't had any contact with any engineering department—

WC: Yeah. So person—

IE: —in any of the colleges.

WC: Anything like that would be—

IE: It isn't a matter of just that. We just haven't been doing any recruiting here in the last few years.

WC: Right.

IE: I haven't been—I don't know whether you know Ernie Elsevier[?] over there at Duke [University] or not. He's a good friend of mine. I used to go over there occasionally.

WC: Yeah. It's a tough job market.

IE: Yeah. Actually, we haven't needed any right lately.

WC: Yeah.

IE: If you don't know Ernie Elsevier, you ought to know him.

WC: Okay.

IE: He's in mechanical engineering over there.

WC: We—

IE: He's a clown.

WC: It's a big place. [laughs]

IE: Yeah, I know it is. I said he's clown, though. He's worth knowing. He's the one over there that the students that have been out of school ten years still call him up with problems. He's that kind. He's a character.

WC: Sounds like it. I'd like to get to know him. Well, I think that those are the basic kinds of questions. I was most interested in your own experience in bringing black people in to work here. I knew you'd been the first one to have a black secretary, and then your experience in West Market Street, and your associations with people on the school board and things like that. Did you—do you know Dr. Ben Smith personally?

IE: Yes.

WC: Would you have a strong impression of his character or of his personality?

IE: Well, I knew him mainly around the church, and of course, he was as a fine a Christian man than you'd find anywhere. He and the man that followed him, Phil Weaver, the same way; they were both strong, principled men that lived that way.

WC: Was Weaver in that church, too?

IE: Yes.

WC: He was? And how about someone like Ed Hudgins, how would you describe him?

IE: I didn't know Ed that well. He was on the board here at Burlington, but I had just met him very casually. I wouldn't want characterize him because I don't know him.

WC: Yeah.

IE: All I know about him is good, but I just—it wouldn't be personal.

WC: Someone like [Eu]gene Hood?

IE: Yes, Gene was a—very much opposed to any change in the status, and he hurt Charlie Bowles a lot with his letters that he wrote him. We finally advised Charlie to throw them in the trash can without opening them. It was the best thing to do—not upset him so much.

WC: They did? These are personal letters as well as letters to the editor?

IE: No, I'm thinking about the personal letters.

WC: And these were frequent, were they?

IE: Yes. Apparently every time he preached on race relations would be my guess. Gene Hood was a fine man and he was a churchgoer, but that part of it never did come across—activist side.

WC: Were there other people like him in the church?

IE: Oh, sure.

WC: As active in opposition as he was?

IE: No, no. But with—of the same thinking, but they were not—they were inactive, [like him for it?], anyway.

WC: How about McDaniel Lewis?

IE: I don't know.

WC: Don't know him?

IE: I know him casually, again, but I've never been around him.

WC: Was [Clarence Leroy] Shuping in the—in that church?

IE: Yes.

WC: Shuping was also?

IE: Well, he was in that same group as Gene Hood. There were maybe a dozen of them.

WC: All within the church?

IE: Yeah. I'm thinking about the group in the church. That's the one I knew more about. At the time all—a lot of this was going on, I was chairman of the board at the church. [chuckles]

WC: I see. So you were not exactly a detached—

IE: That's right.

WC: —observer. You were—

IE: [unclear]

WC: I don't want to put you on the spot. I was—

IE: Yeah.

WC: I don't that many other names of those people. I mean, I know Gene Hood and I know Leroy Shuping, and I know a couple of others. But if you would feel all right about giving me some of those names, I would not use that. What I would do is use that as a basis for going and trying to talk to them and getting their perceptions.

IE: Well, the trouble is Gene Hood died over the weekend.

WC: I didn't know that.

IE: Yeah, he died Saturday.

WC: Wow.

IE: And another one I can think of is [name redacted], and he's in a rest home and he—I don't think he's mentally capable of being interviewed. Shuping's dead. I don't know—what's the old saying about a few funerals solve a few some problems? Maybe this is—

WC: Yeah.

IE: Maybe some of them [unclear]

WC: Wow.

IE: I don't know whether you can find any of that group left.

WC: Yeah.

IE: Gene Hood would've been a good one, because he could've expressed himself well.

WC: Yeah. Darn, I was—that's strange. Strange. Well—

IE: Well, he was in the hospital I expect, a week or two, three, anyway. You couldn't have seen him unless you were here a few weeks ago.

WC: Right. And I haven't really been here for over a year. I was working on this for about six months during summers, and then all last year I was so busy I didn't have a chance to get back to it till this fall.

IE: I was trying to think. Who was—I'll tell you somebody you ought to talk to, if you haven't, is [Armistead] Sapp, the lawyer. You got his name?

WC: Yeah, yeah.

IE: Okay. He represented the forces in court you know.

WC: Yeah. And you think he'd be a cooperative—

IE: Oh, yes. And, of course, he expresses himself well, too, being a lawyer, so he's—

WC: Yeah.

IE: He could give you a good debate on the other side, I'm sure.

WC: Yeah, yeah. Was he in the church, too?

IE: No.

WC: Interesting. Of course, your church was very—

IE: Sort of the center of the whole thing. It was the most liberal element in town. [unclear]

WC: Yeah. That seems to—

[End of Interview]