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William Henry Chafe Oral History Collection

INTERVIEWEE: Kay Troxler

INTERVIEWER: William H. Chafe

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WILLIAM H. CHAFE: I hear mine all the time. We had talked, when I was here last time, about the involvement of the education committee on its own and then as part of the Greensboro Community Fellowship, and this tutoring program in which you were very much involved in ended up, I think.

KAY TROXLER: I was.

WC: Did this program start in East White Oaks?

KT: No. The tutoring started centrally at [North Carolina] A&T [State University] in the library basement, and was aimed at serving all the children in town who had gone into new situations like that, primarily junior high kids.

WC: I see.

KT: The next year—we ran it there one or two years, possibly two; I can't remember—but then hoped that some of the education people would keep that going and we could begin another one in this end of town at St. Pius [X Catholic] School, where you turned coming out—

WC: Yeah.

KT: —which would serve the children in East White Oak and another community out on Pisgah Church Road.

WC: Yeah. Pisgah Church Road is where Josephine Boyd came from.

KT: That's right. Yes. We had hoped those parents, with a few like Mrs. Boyd on the scene, would carpool and bring the children over. It isn't far. And we were offering then individual car transportation for the kids from White Oak, but it did not work.

WC: It did not?

KT: The Pisgah Church Road children just didn't get there.

WC: I see.

KT: So eventually it ended up being just an East White Oak project. And after a couple of years at Pius, we found the transportation was more and more difficult, so we took it right into the East White Oak community using a frame building there that had been a school, a mill school, and then a YMCA [Young Men's Christian Association] that the mill operated for that neighborhood.

WC: Is East White Oak a part of Greensboro?

KT: Yeah.

WC: Yeah. It is?

KT: Now. But it was in the county back in the—

WC: I see.

KT: Nineteen teens, you know, when the mill set it up as a black mill village.

WC: How large is that?

KT: I'd be glad to show it to you sometime.

WC: Okay.

KT: It's one of the—well, I guess the housing is probably about as poor as any in town at the moment. It's small; there are about—I don't know what the census is. I have no idea. There are about three dirt streets that go in back of the television station [WFMY], between the television station and [U.S. Highway] 29, a little pocket, and then one paved street which has nicer homes on it.

WC: So it's not very extensive. It's kind of a self-enclosed community.

KT: No. It's just a little pocket of homes out there, small frame mill homes. And gradually the realtor who bought the whole area is tearing them down.

WC: So you had begun this with junior high kids who were, what, going to Gillespie [Junior High School]?

KT: No. You see, this was after we got the children enrolled all over town.

WC: I see.

KT: It was following this 220.

WC: Yeah.

KT: Which number I'm sure we were responsible for almost entirely.

WC: Yeah, but when the program started at A&T—

KT: The children came on their own. They had to be gotten—

WC: I see.

KT: —there somehow. There was probably—I can't remember all of it. There was—there may be notes in here. This is that notebook I spoke to you about.

WC: Oh, wow.

KT: There may be notes in there about our planning. They probably are toward the last, I guess. I think we had neighborhood committees, people assigned to work in different parts of town, and I assume we probably worked it through them about transportation.

WC: I see. Yeah.

KT: To get folks there.

WC: So that the age of the students at the White Oaks was younger than the junior highs you had over at A&T.

KT: Not necessarily—

WC: No?

KT: Because we made breakthroughs at every level we could.

WC: I see.

KT: I'm not even sure whether any of the White Oak children came to study hall at A&T. I do not know. My own local assignment in this whole thing was Pisgah Church Road. I worked out there with another doctor's wife, Marguerite Evans, Mrs. George Evans, and I worked together.

WC: I've got—

KT: Have you talked to her?

WC: No. I really want to very much.

KT: She's delightful. We worked out there. I had sat in on a meeting or two at White Oak with Mr. Robert Alexander and some of the other people from the committee, but the Greensboro Citizens Association had worked in White Oak over a period of time. That's an all-black group, generally.

WC: Yeah.

KT: So our group kind of went in following the Citizens Association. I remember going over there once with other people. Mr. Alexander was the main person who was talking to the children about transfer, and these were mostly junior and senior high school students he was talking to, encouraging them to transfer to the schools they lived near.

WC: Yeah, yeah. Now, this was going hand in hand with your effort to petition the school board into geographic assignment, right?

KT: Yes, yes.

WC: And I know we talked about this somewhat before, but were you part of that delegation that went to see Phil Weaver?

KT: Many times.

WC: Many times? There were many, many delegations?

KT: Yes, yes. We went down certainly many more than one time.

WC: Yeah.

KT: I can remember several times when we went in to talk with him about various things. And then, of course, went to the full board meeting, too—

WC: Yeah.

KT: —to speak publicly.

WC: And you found him unresponsive?

KT: Very difficult, very defensive, very protective of the total school situation.

WC: And the school board itself?

KT: Same way.

WC: Same way? Now, was Dr. Evans on the school board at that time?

KT: Dr. Evans was the only friend we had.

WC: Yeah.

KT: George was on it. Yes. I—now, wait. I'd better back up. I would need to look down a list of the men and people who were on that.

WC: Yeah.

KT: George was the black member.

WC: Yeah.

KT: I can't think right now of anybody now who was sympathetic.

WC: This is maybe off the subject a little, but didn't you tell me last time that Margaret and Ken Harris had not signed a petition?

KT: Yeah.

WC: Yeah? I just wanted to—

KT: This had to do—what petition did I take to them? Well, I spoke just with Margaret; Ken was not at home the day I went by. I think maybe it was this one. I sort of believe it was.

WC: Yeah.

KT: And she led me to believe that Ken would oppose it very much, that maybe her own sympathies would be a little different.

WC: I was struck in looking and reading over that petition yesterday at how few people from the economic establishment of Greensboro are listed there, how few business people, bankers. Now—and there—it struck me that there were two possible explanations for that. One is that this is a self-selected group in which people circulating the petition went to their friends or—

KT: We tried other people. No.

WC: Or—

KT: I don't—well, I know I was turned down, and I'm not a very brave person about this kind of thing. [laughs] But I did approach a number of people on it. I happened to know the—or to go to the same church as the man who headed up Burlington Industries here, pretty much—well, not headed it up, but was one of the top people, John—J.C. Cowan Sr., and I called him about it and got him on.

WC: How about Charlie Myers? Was he asked?

KT: I don't know. I went to—I called Mildred and Norman Cooper. And Mildred's brother Ed Hudgins had headed up some rather liberal groupings here, and I can't think right now what.

WC: Well, of course, he was—

KT: Some sort of a—well, he headed up the school board.

WC: Yeah, yeah.

KT: He'd been head of the school board, I guess. But more than that, he had an aura of some liberalism about him. But—and Mildred is a fine woman and was so active in my church, but I got a no on that after some soul-searching. She checked with her husband.

WC: Now, Hudgins did sign it?

KT: Well, I would've expected that, but not the Coopers.

WC: Yeah.

KT: I can't remember who else of prominence I took it to, but I'm sure it was offered to many people.

WC: Because it was rather striking—

KT: Though you generally find the folks, I believe, in the academic community and the religious community, those two.

WC: Yeah.

KT: And you probably find more women than men who will go out on a limb on things like this, for lots of reasons.

WC: What do you think some of the reasons are?

KT: Well, I've always thought economic reprisals were a strong one. Of course, I was interested in checking over those things about doctors. There were two. Jim Bruce signed it, and I didn't remember that, and that made me feel very good. There may be others, but just in my quick glance, his and my own husband's names were the only two I saw. Peer disapproval, I guess, and coupled in with economic liabilities, I would think would be the two things. So much of it really boils down to money.

WC: Yeah.

KT: You know [laughs] like most everything else.

WC: Yeah. It's true. Did the Greensboro Citizens Association have women in it, or is that just men?

KT: Oh, yes.

WC: It was.

KT: Mrs. Evans was very active in the group.

WC: She was?

KT: She can tell you a lot about that.

WC: Good. I wasn't sure whether—I heard mostly men involved.

KT: I'm sure there were numbers of women in it.

WC: How long did this project at East White Oaks continue?

KT: Well, it's still going on.

WC: It is?

KT: Wednesday nights at down at West Market [Street United Methodist] Church.

WC: I see.

KT: West Market Methodist.

WC: Because I [unclear]. And your involvement in it has continued up until now also?

KT: Yeah. One of the ministers at our church, thank goodness, has taken over the real directorship of it. Paul Bradley, who is fine minister of education for us, and has done a splendid job, I think, in many ways. We've continued our involvement in the community. This summer was the first summer we had not chosen the recreation director. We paid for a young man. But the community council in East White Oak—which had been developed and strengthened a lot by a sociology professor from Bennett [College], who was here briefly, who has moved away now for a time but may move back—the community council wished to choose their own person, which was just fine, and we paid for it and furnished equipment for sports, and that kind of thing, and our brand new church bus to

be used on outings and, too. But we did not actually plan it and supervise it the way we have done in the past.

WC: So this has been—this is a West Market Street project.

KT: Yes. This is—it's shifted. The sponsorship has shifted a whole lot. Of course, the [Greensboro] Community Fellowship, as we've said, phased that some time ago as far as activity went, and then phased out definitely.

WC: Right.

KT: And our involvement with the Catholic church has ended—the Catholic school has ended as of two or three years ago. We tutored back at the church again after five or six years and [unclear] went back to the church for about three or four years, but the personnel there changes so fast. There's only one sister there now that I know at all.

WC: Really?

KT: And a new principal came in and we sensed, and it was made clear, that maybe it was the time for changed patterns. Some of the kids at study hall had gotten rowdy, and it was a problem, so we moved it back to West Market—or down to West Market. It had never really been down there, but it's developed in good ways. We've limited the span of grades that we work with to elementary, and for the last two years have had a one-to-one, just about, tutor-child relationship, with good equipment, and I think the total effect is a good one.

WC: Yeah.

KT: I'm not sure how many grades we raised significantly, but I know it's a positive thing.

WC: Yeah. So only briefly was it out at East White Oak?

KT: Well, it was there—I've probably padded the years badly. As I talked, I realized that couldn't all add up to, what, eleven, twelve years? We must've worked out in White Oak—we were at Pius maybe one year, and then at White Oak about four perhaps, and then back at Pius maybe three, and then to West Market.

WC: Did you work closely with Father [Hugh] Dolan over there?

KT: Oh, yes.

WC: He's still there?

KT: Yes. I haven't seen him in some time, but he certainly is still there.

WC: Is he an activist?

KT: Very much so. Yeah, or has been. I haven't been in close touch with him recently, and he's getting older, considerably. Certainly through all the early days he was very, very much so.

I'm not sure—I'm just not in touch enough to know exactly what you'd call the real activist group in Greensboro right now. You know more about that than I do, I expect. Things move along, you know, but the Black Power kind of thing you don't hear a lot about. We never did hear a lot of Black Muslim stuff here. There were some, may still be, but it was never very—and even—I was thinking the other day, Malcolm X University, you know, has folded up, and the fellow who headed it up [Howard Fuller], who was such a firebrand and an interesting speaker—

WC: He's back in Durham.

KT: I don't even know. Is that where he is?

WC: Yes.

KT: I was wondering where in the world he'd gone.

WC: Yeah, yeah.

KT: So I'm not really sure quite what the picture is right now.

WC: Yeah. I guess GAPP [Greensboro Association of Poor People] is the local—

KT: Yes. Yes, I guess that's about it. And GAPP is at work in the White Oak community. They—and the extension service from A&T does a lot of good things, too—can do in black communities. I was completely unacquainted with their work until, I guess, maybe the GAPP people brought it into White Oak. But there's an interesting young fellow over there named David Purcell who works with the extension services.

WC: I'll have to talk to him.

KT: And Barbara Kamara is on their community council from GAPP. She also heads up LINC here, the Learning Institute of North Carolina.

WC: Yeah. I've heard her name before.

KT: She's on the community council over there, and has brought into the community—or somebody has—some 4-H work, urban 4-H work, which I knew nothing about at all.

WC: That's interesting.

KT: Would you like some more?

WC: Yeah. I'd love some more. I'll go get it.

[Recording paused]

WC: There were a couple of—just to pursue the White Oaks thing just a little bit. I was going through the minutes of the Community Fellowship, which Warren Ashby had found and let me take, and there was a point there, I guess in '66 maybe, maybe '67, when you had requested some help, some volunteer help for tutoring, and had been disappointed with the response.

KT: Yeah, I think I remember that very occasion. I remember once trying to explain to them what a marvelous job they were doing, or had brought about, and how badly we needed help. But that group became a forum for discussion, which has its purpose, but certainly did not respond to the need for action much.

WC: Did not?

KT: No. It phased—actually, originally, it had been very active in various fields. Some of the men were working on open housing, and there were a number of subcommittees like our education committee.

WC: Yeah.

KT: But gradually all that seemed to just vanish. And it was a real pleasant place to see friends for lunch and to renew ties across town and see people that you didn't run into frequently and to hear interesting discussions of what was going on about civil rights around town. There were some good programs, but it just did not really involve the members much.

WC: Yeah. Well, I get the impression going through these minutes that there was something of an identity crisis, that the group had obviously started with the intention of being activist.

KT: I think so.

WC: And that for a while it had been activist, and then there was a kind of falling off, and then an effort to revive, I think, along activist lines, particularly in the housing situation—and, of course, again, I guess in ‘68 when Martin Luther King was killed.

KT: Yes.

WC: But mostly discussion groups, you say?

KT: Yeah.

WC: Now, at that point—at some point there was an interaction between yourself and Mrs. Graves from—it was—

KT: A&T.

WC: And—

KT: Anne Graves.

WC: Youth Educational Services [YES]? Was she associated with that?

KT: No. She was associated with a group called GUTS here—GUTS?

WC: Yeah.

KT: Greensboro United Tutorial Services. It was—I don’t know really where that program originated exactly, but it was a campus program that enlisted students for tutoring. And we tried to get tutors from that group at A&T with very small success. There were a few who came, but not regularly, not dependably, and we just stopped—stopped even attempting it.

WC: Yeah. So there was your own program and then they had their own program?

KT: Yes. Well, and there was another unit of GUTS over on the UNCG [University of North Carolina at Greensboro] campus. You see, on different campuses it would be set up.

WC: I see. So for the most part, your program did not enlist the student tutors?

KT: Well, we did. Yes, we did. But we did it in a different way. We did it through contacts we had on the Greensboro College campus, through—I was trying to think, was it through—well, there's not a Wesley Foundation at Greensboro College, but we knew there was a young sociology professor there who was interested in all this, and I know for several years he found the students for us, even had held his own little training sessions kind of for them and some evaluation sessions with them, and supplied us a number. And we still do. A lot of our tutors come from Greensboro College. Some come from UNCG, and we got those through the Wesley Foundation in part.

WC: Yeah.

KT: And then Guilford College at one time had some fine people involved in the program. We have nobody from Guilford right now. The student picture changes so fact.

WC: Yeah.

KT: Kind of depends on the contact you have on the campus for recruiting.

WC: Yeah.

KT: We've had a few from Bennett. One of our best students we ever had came from Bennett. That was some years ago.

WC: I was going to ask you about Bennett. What—I just had lunch with a professor from Bennett. Is Bennett—how does Bennett fit into the whole picture?

KT: I'm not real sure. I've had contacts with Bennett in different ways over the years, with foreign students that we have served as host family for. Primarily, that's been my contact. I know some faculty people over there—not many now. Bennett is a school aimed, I think, primarily at Southern black girls in a manner that probably harks back twenty years maybe. They were protesting for liberalized curfew hours at a time when other campuses were way out beyond that, you know, and were dealing with quite different problems. It was set up a long time ago. Dr. Willa Player was the president for a good many years—was the first president I knew at Bennett, and was an amazing woman.

WC: Yeah.

KT: Has gone on to government work.

WC: Is she with HEW [Department of Health, Education, and Welfare]?

KT: Something like that. I don't think it's really HEW, but it's some branch of government work. And Dr. David Jones, who really developed Bennett College—I hope you've had a chance to meet Mrs. Jones.

WC: Well, I haven't. I was just told that she—that I should—

KT: Oh, she is so marvelous.

WC: Not only should I see her, but I should probably see her with someone else, that she would not want to see me privately. I'm not sure why I was told that.

KT: I'd be more than happy to go with you.

WC: Yeah.

KT: She's one of my very special friends.

WC: That would be great.

KT: I don't see her often—ran into her out at the airport this summer once when we were both putting young relatives on a plane or pulling them off. But she and I—she, of course, is Methodist and worked in the Methodist church. I mentioned to you the kindergarten, I think, the summer kindergarten—

WC: Yes.

KT: —at Hunter Hills School—or Hunter School—that the Methodist church has sponsored—St. Matthews and West Market together. And she and I worked a lot on that. And she's just been a model, kind of, for me over the years. But she would have real insights into a much broader scope of this whole picture and, of course, from a little different stance, too, than mine. She's an amazing person. But Bennett itself—I understand that there are some—there's a faction on the campus that is very fairly radical, but, of course, I've seen it too through the eyes of African students, and that is a completely different thing, too.

WC: Yeah, yeah.

KT: So I just really am not very well informed on Bennett.

WC: It's an interesting question. I—obviously that Bennett and A&T are so terribly different.

KT: Very, very different. Yeah.

WC: It's just—

KT: But I do feel that as far as concerns and where they are, Bennett is kind of twenty years back in a lot of ways.

WC: Yeah. Now—

KT: I have a friend who has just retired a couple of years ago from teaching French at Bennett, Dr. Annie Allen, who I don't know whether this would be—if she too has—well, she wasn't here when all the desegregation was being fought out, but she is a very perceptive and intelligent woman. Her cousin still works in the development office at Bennett; these are two white lady spinsters who moved here from north someplace. They both—they've lived in Paris for a time, and then came down here. They're Unitarians.

[Redacted goodbye with identified person]

KT: And she might have some other ideas about the college if you really want to pursue that.

WC: Yeah.

KT: I don't know whether that's a little peripheral.

WC: Well, it's—I'm not sure. I'm finding—it may not be. It may be fairly important. I'm just not quite—but I'm trying to get a sort of focus on it a little bit.

Now, you came in with this program—which clearly resulted in this massive increase from thirty-seven to two hundred and twenty, in the years '63 to '64, in the number of students who were going to desegregated schools—and you kept on pushing over the years, didn't you, for more and more of this?

KT: Not in quite the same organized fashion.

WC: I see.

KT: Because we found too that once the goal was achieved, the push decelerated a little bit. People moved away—some of the faculty people who had been so helpful. Dr. Gladys Royal moved away, people like that. And actually our efforts right then were more involved in trying to help and support those children we had gotten in. Then, of course, the new ruling came along so that the schools tended to be more open anyway. We never, as I can remember, followed through on another house to house canvas trying to encourage parents to apply for transfer the way that we did this first time.

WC: Yeah. Did the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] take over much of the initiative at that point, or—

KT: I can't remember their doing so.

WC: Yeah. I was just wondering, to purse a question on the NAA—

KT: Have you talked with George Simkins?

WC: Yeah. Not too much. I want to go see him again. But how about—do you know anything about the conflict between him and [Dr. Edwin] Edmonds?

KT: Oh, Dr. Edmonds—no, not really. Dr. Edmonds was an extremely outspoken man. He was an eloquent speaker, but determined in his approach and rather blunt in his approach, and I don't really—No, I didn't know really of any special conflict there. Of course, George took over when Dr. Edmonds left. And Dr. Edmonds' wife was involved in a whole lot of all of this, too. I knew her quite well, and she was involved in—oh, I can't remember what year they left. He went out to New Haven [Connecticut].

WC: Yeah. I hope to see them—

KT: Oh, fine. Well, please remember me to them if you do.

WC: —at Thanksgiving time.

KT: I never knew him very well, but I knew her and I knew the children.

WC: What's her first name?

KT: I wish you hadn't asked.

WC: [laughs] I was just—

KT: As I get older, names get harder and harder to dredge up.

WC: All I know is his first name and I—

KT: No. It's, I think, a double name—Mae. Mae was her name. Mae Edmonds. Now how about that? Don't ask me for another name all afternoon.

WC: That's good. That's fantastic. [laughter] Anyway, I do hope to see them. And I just get a sense that there was a lot of controversy surrounding him.

KT: There was controversy around him. I don't know, though, that George Simkins particularly opposed it. George is a—can be a very controversial person himself, of course.

WC: Right, right. Yeah.

KT: I didn't know about it, or if it did, I can't remember—if I did, I can't remember it now.

WC: Yeah. Was the controversy about Edmonds public, or was it—would it have been reported in the papers, or—

KT: No, I don't think so.

WC: No? Private kind of?

KT: I think so, because the controversial part was not the kind of thing that was being covered in the papers then. It was the way he—well, he was a little like—what's his name? [Howard] Fuller, you know, just pushing people on to move into their heritage and move on out, and it was early for that kind of thing, and people were still scared.

WC: Yeah.

KT: But I don't think—and I have no idea what his professional connections may have been at Bennett. He was a very intelligent man, and I can imagine that with this kind of personality, he could have been abrasive perhaps in those ways, too. He was not here too very long. I don't know how many years he was here.

WC: No. I think about five years or something like that.

KT: Maybe. Yeah.

WC: Well, getting back to the school situation, do you have any idea of why the school board resisted the HEW order? Was that ever something which anyone had any insight into?

KT: [unclear] When was this?

WC: Well, ’68 on, I guess. Sixty-eight was the year, I think, that the order came down, and they fought it for three or four years.

KT: Oh, yeah. I’m sure. Sure. I mean, I remember it. I’m not sure I can—I’m trying to remember. I know George Evans pointed out repeatedly that all we were doing was wasting money.

WC: Yeah.

KT: Two lawyers’ fees, here and in Washington.

WC: Yeah.

KT: And I heard him say once at a meeting, not one school board that fought—carried it all the way like that—had ever been declared—had ever had a judgment in its favor, and it was utterly spendthrift and foolish to do it. [It was] a waste of time and effort. And I think maybe this was one of the messages that he brought just before he resigned from the school board. He had served ten years and certainly deserved to be given a rest on it. You should talk with him if you haven’t.

WC: I want to. Isn’t there a black man head of the school board now?

KT: Walter Johnson. I was thinking this afternoon you should—he’s a young lawyer. You should talk with Walter, too.

WC: Has he been on the board for very long, or—

KT: He’s been on the board—did he come on it when George came off, or was this—there’s been a black member all along. Well, there are two now. Otis Hairston’s on, too, and he’s a fine man.

WC: Yeah.

[End of Interview]