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William Henry Chafe Oral History Collection

INTERVIEWEE: Edward Zane

INTERVIEWER: William H. Chafe

DATE: n.d.

WILLIAM CHAFE: You were involved in the swimming pool. Do you recall when that was? What year that was—approximately when?

EDWARD ZANE: I probably have some [pause]. That was after ‘61. I was not on the [Greensboro] City Council then.

WC: You were not on the city council.

EZ: No. That was after ‘61. I’m sure of that, because we wouldn’t have done it—it was after ‘61 and before fifty—no, before—let’s see, the—[pause]. I could be wrong as to the time. I really don’t recall.

WC: I could check it out. I just wondered whether offhand it was in your frame of mind. Because there was another—the swimming pool situation, I’m confused about it because, of course, there was an effort by some blacks to swim at the Lindley Pool in the late fifties.

EZ: They had no swimming pool for the blacks.

WC: Yeah. And so this was an effort by yourself and Mr. [Spencer] Love to—

EZ: That’s right, to provide swimming facilities for the blacks.

WC: Now, wasn’t there also—somewhere I have either a newspaper item or from someone a comment that Mr. [Caesar] Cone and Mr. Love built a pool or provided the money for the building of the pool. Is this the same pool or—?

EZ: The same pool.

WC: It's the same pool.

EZ: Mr. Love provided—bought the pool. The pool was already there.

WC: I see.

EZ: And it was purchased and made available to all blacks. And that went on as a pool for the community, for the black community, until the question of segregation was eliminated and all pools were made available to blacks and whites. By then we felt that particular pool area could be better—the city was looking for an area for the establishment of the summit for the blacks, and that was considered just an ideal location for it. And with the other pools accepting blacks, there no longer existed a need for the pool. And they had a pool there at the YMCA [Young Men's Christian Association]. So with the pool available at the YMCA, which is right there in a comparable area, they saw no need for that one. And we communicated with the city, and they said they would like to have.

WC: So the pool at the YMCA had not been open to blacks at the time that Mr. Love bought the other pool?

EZ: That is correct. That is correct.

WC: I see. So the YMCA pool had been segregated and—even though it was in a comparable area.

EZ: The YMCA—I'm speaking of the Hayes-Taylor—is on East Market Street. It's almost to Benbow Road. If you follow that—in other words, between West Market Street and Lee Street, you have the YMCA on East Market, and the pool where the center is now on Lee Street.

WC: I see.

EZ: But it's almost a straight line between the two. Now, the pool at the YMCA was open to everybody.

[Recording error, some portions of the discussion not transcribed]

WC: I see, yes, so Mr. Love was involved in both places.

EZ: Both, the Hayes-Taylor—but the county was different.

WC: —the county was different, and the pool which was purchased and then given to the city to operate came first, before the Hayes-Taylor Y swimming pool. You can see why I was confused [laughs] prior to this, because I kept on having people mention swimming pools to me and I had difficulty.

[further discussion of Hayes-Taylor YMCA not transcribed due to recording error]

WC: Now, the police—so the police just came to you with this report, and were they fearful of violence from white people coming to the Woolworth's?

EZ: That is correct. They feared that the white element that was gathering there was so anti-black that violence looked inevitable. That was merely reporting what the situation was.

WC: Right.

EZ: And it was at that point that I advised to them that it was the duty and responsibility of the council to do something about it. And the answer I got was, "Well, what can you do?"

And I said, "Well, one of the things we can do is open communication between the blacks and the stores and see what might be done."

That wasn't received with acceptance.

WC: It was not?

EZ: No. And I can appreciate why, because the majority of the members of the council in my judgment didn't want to become involved in a conflict involving blacks and whites.

WC: They thought they could avoid it?

EZ: They thought they could avoid it. Well, the situation began getting still worse. And I made a personal inspection of it; went down and spent, oh, an hour, an hour and a half, observing who was coming in, who was coming out, what was being said, names that were being called—niggers, black son of a bitches. And I went back and told them if we didn't do something, we were going to have rioting and killing and property destruction, and something should be done. And again he wasn't receptive to the mood, feeling that, "Well, give it time. It will work itself out." And I felt certain in my mind that remaining silent and doing nothing about it that we were contributing to the certainty of violence.

And it was at that point that I made a decision to project myself personally into it by resigning from the council. So I prepared a statement of resignation and then asked the mayor to meet with me and the members of the council. And at the meeting, I told them I felt strongly that something should be done towards establishing communication between

the blacks and the stores to see what solution might be worked out. Because if that wasn't done, I felt certain, based on my observations and what I had seen, the thing would burst into violence and rioting.

At that meeting, the mayor definitely would not accept my resignation, and he said, "Well, let me make a declaration that I'll appoint a committee. Will you act as chairman of the committee?" And I told him I would. That brought me into the activity of being the head of a committee appointed by the mayor to establish communications with the blacks and the stores, to see if a solution could be found to the demands of the blacks that they be permitted to be served in the eating establishments operated by the stores.

WC: Did you suggest the names of people for that committee, or was that primarily his decision?

EZ: I did not. I asked him to appoint individuals, but I cautioned him to be sure to appoint individuals who were of a liberal mind on the issue of blacks and whites, because facing realities even today, you still have closed minds that the blacks shouldn't have the rights that he has. That's about—if we're going anywhere with the committee, it should be a committee that's nearly neutral in the situation that you could possibly have, so that we won't have any feelings one way or the other.

Now, after the committee was established, I contacted the students.

WC: You had had no contact prior to that point?

EZ: No, none at all. And I asked for a meeting with them. Now, at the meeting—it was not a committee meeting. I didn't want a committee meeting, for the simple reason that experiences taught me that the larger the group, the more difficult it is to get anywhere.

WC: Can I interrupt you at this point and ask you how you made contact with the students?

EZ: I communicated with the president of the university. They were [North Carolina] A&T State College, at that time, students. And he arranged for a meeting.

WC: Is that Dr. [Warmouth] Gibbs at that point?

EZ: Yes. And when I went there, I'd say there were at least three or four hundred blacks, girls, men, men and women. And I talked with them, and they gave me their point of view, and they felt that the segregation was wrong; that the refusal of stores to serve them at the food counters was wrong; that they were accepted in any other department—they could buy anything they wanted, pay for it—but when they went to the eating counter, they were refused. They asked me, frankly, "Now, how do you feel about this?"

And I explained to them that I had felt that that was wrong for years. I never had accepted it, I had always felt that segregation was wrong, and that I would do everything in my power to get the situation corrected, provided that they suspend all further blocking of the store or sit-downs in the stores and give me an opportunity, a proper environment, where I could talk with the store operators and talk with them and see what could be done about it. I said, "Now, if it isn't accomplished within a reasonable time, or if I feel that it cannot be accomplished, you will be told. [unclear]"

WC: Now, you were talking to three or four hundred people?

EZ: That's right.

WC: In an auditorium kind of setting?

EZ: In their auditorium on campus. They accepted that, particularly the five students that were the leaders. They knew about me, and I had been—worked in civic affairs. While on city council, I directed the public attention to the slums that existed in the city. These slums were occupied by the poor blacks, and that they were being exploited. Black people who owned these homes, they had no—they had no sanitation facilities in the homes. There were three and four families living in a home, and each one had to pay his rent weekly or he was thrown out, and that the people that owned those homes were getting—were receiving very substantial rents in relationship to the value of their houses. And that the city should act to condemn the properties unless the owner brought the houses up to standards provided in the city code. You have plenty of laws, but they just weren't being enforced.

And at that point, the city agreed, the council agreed, to have a study made and these are reported in the city files. A study was made and when the study was completed, it pointed out that there were 860-odd homes which had no sanitation, no toilets, or bathrooms in the homes at all. This was a slum area. And some of them had not even water. They had to get water on the outside. Some had cold water and outhouses in the back. Some had no water inside; they had to carry water in buckets from outside into the house for cooking. And that they were unfit for human habitation and should be condemned. Well, that brought on what ultimately came into being the redevelopment and the elimination of the slums. The students knew all about that and they knew that my interest was sincere in them.

Then the results of the communication with the store—you have a record of that in the information I gave you. I met terrific resistance. And the thing that surprised me more than anything else was the bitterness that developed in the community against [unclear] and myself as a result of my undertaking the chairmanship. And coming out, the newspaper got it all because they were present at meetings. Well, I was very frank in stating that it was wrong.

WC: Yes.

EZ: Basically wrong, it's un-American. And I said, "Now, if you don't want to serve the blacks, then I would say this: close your counter. If you don't close your counter, I'm going move that the city council take away your license on the grounds that your method of operation is not conducive to public safety. If it's going to create riots the way you operate, then you ought to close it." They did close. And then they realized at the closing they were losing a good deal of clientele, because the very people eating over there when they closed because of this black [unclear], they quit buying. So they said, "We can't do this. We're going to have to open the eating places again."

Well, a number of suggestions were made to the students which they did not accept: having the blacks served, but having two counters. I said, "Would this be comparable to your schools? You will be served, but there will be a counter with the same food, same prices, same service—would be black and the other would be white." That wasn't acceptable to them. Some of the stores said they would do that if the students would accept it; some of them said they would not. There were any number of suggestions made as to what might be done, but still giving them service that was still maintaining the segregation. But that wasn't acceptable to the students.

And finally, after numerous meetings—I told you, I think, before—not only [unclear] agree to courtesy and more consideration for any group than the students did. They would not allow me to leave the campus because of the threats that had been made against my life. They would not allow me to leave the campus. I was escorted outside the campus because they didn't want anything to happen to me and the blame be placed on them. The city wanted to—for me to accept twenty-four hour police protection, and I refused that, because I felt that it would be leading into—giving satisfaction to the opposition that I was scared and concerned, and I felt that I had nothing to be concerned about. I wasn't doing anything that was injurious to the city. I was merely attempting to preclude the possibility of rioting and destruction within the city. And if they didn't understand that, well, I couldn't help it.

Ultimately, one of the stores refused to do anything which was acceptable to the students. I just told them, "Well, there isn't need of my telling you that there's any hope. They're just not going to do it. So now it's up to you as to what you're going to do. Now, my personal feeling is that if you go out and conflict by rioting, that you're merely reducing your chances. You're going to lose the friends that you made." And they didn't make a tremendous amount of friends as a result of my bringing up publicly what was taking place and that the segregation or the refusal to serve them was completely wrong. There's no basis in law, at that time or today, where that could be done. Because it wasn't a case of we have segregated facilities. You had no facilities. You merely refused the serve.

WC: When you went to that meeting, were you the only white person in that room?

EZ: With the blacks?

WC: Yes.

EZ: Yes. No one else—I don't think anyone else would have gone. [laughs]

WC: Were there a large number of—or how many black adults were there, would you say? Were there school administrators there in that meeting?

EZ: I'd say at practically every meeting there would be school administrators.

WC: So you met repeatedly then with varying numbers of students?

EZ: Oh, yes. There was an understanding that I would report to them frequently during the week as to what progress was being made.

WC: Now, were most of your meetings with the leadership, per se, as five or six students who were primarily involved, or were the meetings frequently with larger groups?

EZ: The meetings were frequently with larger groups in which the leaders were present, because the leaders really wanted the group to know what—first hand.

WC: They wanted their own people to hear what was going on immediately. Would you say that you came to know the leaders though more intimately than the others? In other words, did you have more interchange with the leaders than you did have with, let's say, the audience? Was there any kind of situation in which the leaders might be sitting with you and the audience sort of more removed, or was everybody together?

EZ: No, the leaders were generally at the front, at the front, and the rest of the audience was back of them or in the room with them.

WC: So your conversation was more directly with them.

EZ: With them, but the rest of them were there to hear it and making their remarks they'd have to make. And I'm not provocating[?] some of the members in the audience, some of the persons in the audience, did take strong issue with me, but the leaders put it down on

the grounds that, “He’s doing the best he can. He has his problems. He’s here to report, and let’s leave him alone. Let him tell us just exactly what’s happening.”

WC: Were you the only one who was serving as this kind of liaison? Were there other, quote unquote, liberal whites, who also—

EZ: There was only one—what was his name? He was a business in—it’s in the book.

WC: Oscar Burnett?

EZ: No, he was in second-hand clothes and such.

WC: Oh, Ralph Johns.

EZ: Ralph Johns. He was—well, he was more of a hindrance than a help, because he wasn’t acting on a basis of conciliation, trying to bring two groups together, trying to work out some form of compromise that would be acceptable. He was of the militant type. And I think the greatest good I did for the blacks, when it all ended, was to instill within them that if you are going to succeed, you are going to have to do it on the basis of earning your respect and going at it. Don’t give up. Keep going. But to go at it through the processes of law and not through violence. And I believe I sold it.

Now the moment you go beyond the law, you’re going to lose the friends you’ve already made. Whereas if you go at it in the sense of establishing your rights—and I believe that there isn’t any question that the segregation is wrong—you will retain your friends. You’ll increase your white support, because whether they agree with you or not, they’ll respect you for testing the law to establish your rights. And you’re doing it as it should be done, whereas if you’re attempting to do it by force, you’re going to lose and not gain.

WC: Was there one or more of student leaders who you came to see as particularly influential, or for whom you developed a particular respect, greater respect, let’s say, than for others? In other words, did any of them stand out in your perception as being particularly important or charismatic, let’s say.

EZ: I’d say that all five of the students, the leaders, were adamant in their position that legally the stores had no right to refuse to sell to them, and that the segregation of the black was absolutely wrong, and that they were not going to quit until that question was resolved. They were convinced. They were adamant. And they didn’t care. They indicated that they were prepared to pay any cost. But this is wrong, and I agreed with them. I think rather

than discouragement, I encouraged them, but encouraged them to proceed along the lines of the judicial and the law rather than through violence.

Now, they had no question in their mind as to how I felt. Legally, I had no doubt in my mind that under the Constitution and our laws, that the denial of the rights of the blacks—segregation and refusal and so on—the denial of equal rights, was incompatible with our system. There's no way you could justify it.

WC: But they seemed to act together. There was not one of them who was perhaps more—

EZ: No.

WC: —decisive than the others?

EZ: They acted in unison and in—I'd say, in [complete harmony?].

WC: Did you get a sense of their acting—I know they were acting on their own, but were they getting advice from any elder people in the community, in the black community?

EZ: Yes, I think they were getting advice from the faculty, and I think they were getting advice from the church leadership and [unclear] the ministers. And to my amazement, some of the suggestions and comments made by the ministers were completely militant and radical. Their approach was worse considerably—well, I won't say worse, but much stronger, and they wouldn't have hesitated to see violence erupt in order to achieve the objective.

WC: Do you recall—now, I'll just—were people like Reverend [Julius] Douglas, Reverend [Otis] Hairston—?

EZ: Hairston was tough, very tough person. And how far they would have gone—that is, I recognize, having lived seventy-six years, a man will say something, but from the saying to the doing is quite a distance. A man will say that under certain circumstances "this is what I'll do," but when he's called out to do it, he may not do it. So you don't know how many of the remarks that were made by ministers were made on the spur of the moment or were made under the influence of the situation of the time.

WC: Do you recall any context in which those remarks might have been made? Were they made publicly for press releases or were they made to you?

EZ: No, they were made in private conversation.

WC: With you?

EZ: Yes.

WC: And would these conversations be at these larger meetings or would they be aside?

EZ: No, they'd be at the—most of them were at YMCA where there'd be probably thirty or forty or fifty. But the thing that—when I realized that the stores were not going to do it because of the pressure that was being put on them—they were under terrific pressure by the anti-black sentiment within the community—they were reluctant to come to any agreement and refused to do anything at first. Later, they did. At first, they did not. When I realized that a solution was not going to be made, then I did concentrate by instilling in the minds of the blacks, "Don't give up your fight, but approach it from a peaceful solution. Approach it through the courts or by communication. Don't give up, but stay away from violence."

WC: Wasn't it the boycott that pretty much finally brought the store owners around?

EZ: Yes.

WC: They felt it enough in their pocketbooks that they—

EZ: That's right. It was the boycott that made them open the eating places by the whites saying, "Well, if we can't eat here, then we won't buy." They boycotted the place and forced them to reopen. Then the blacks came in and started boycotting buying anything in the store. That forced them to do something.

WC: When you mentioned these meetings at the Y where some of these clergymen and other—I take it other adults, as well as the clergy, would have been there. And were these militant remarks, were these threats? How would you characterize?

EZ: Well, I wouldn't characterize it as threats, more as a declaration of intent that we're going to get our rights, regardless of what it causes. If violence is the only way, then it's going to be done. We hope it won't come to that, but we're not going to tolerate this any longer.

WC: Now this kind of meeting, would there have been a number of whites present, or, again, would you have been the only white person?

EZ: No, there may have been other whites present.

WC: Would your whole committee ever have gone to one of these meetings at the Y?

EZ: See, unfortunately, I had a committee that the majority called themselves liberals, but they were—I call them extreme conservatives on the question of black and white. In other words, "A black is a fine fellow. I'd like to see him treated well, but let him stay in his place." That type of attitude. And it still exists today. They'll never change.

WC: I don't want to call the list of the committee, because I realize that you don't want to make that kind of assessment of each member. But that committee was made up of councilmen, [Greensboro] Chamber of Commerce people, and merchants, is that correct?

EZ: Well, there were some businessmen.

WC: Yes.

EZ: There were some businessmen.

WC: Would they have come from chamber of commerce or would they have been—

EZ: They would have been selected [unclear]. What they may have tried to do then [cough] is get the most influential men, and use their influence in dealing with the stores. And I would say this; they did attempt to exert their influence to work out some sort of solution for serving the black.

WC: They did this on their own.

EZ: Yes.

WC: As part of the committee.

EZ: As part of the committee. Now, we had meetings of the committee where the students were called in to present their side. And then we had the store representatives come in at that time, so that the committee could get the viewpoint directly from the students just what their position was. Then the stores appeared and they gave us what their position was. In other words, most of the stores took the position that, "If it's legal for us to do it—well, where's the law that says you can't?"

"Well, the law says you need separate facilities. Where's your separate facility? You just provide for the whites and you don't provide for the blacks."

WC: Oh, dear.

[Recording paused]

EZ: You were talking about the committee. You had some two or three members of the committee who I would say were truly liberals, that they recognized that the treatment of the black was completely uncalled for, wrong, but still thinking in terms of a segregated basis, [still with?] that class recognizing that this is wrong, that this person should have a right to their own place indeed, and he shouldn't be refused. And if you're going to operate an eating establishment, then you should provide the service for all. Not just the service for white, but service white and black. And you could have two counters and still people can eat. But they believed in it. They fought for it [unclear].

Then you had the group that were lukewarm, willing to see the— not to start any trouble, shops looted, broken windows, and the downtown life disturbed, but let's not change things.

WC: Yeah. It's surprising, looking back over the list of committee members, Waldo Falkener was the only black person on the committee.

EZ: And Waldo finally—he was—I believe Falkener at that time was [unclear] city council.

WC: Yes, yes.

EZ: Now, you take Henry Frye—who is a member of the House of Representatives now—I don't believe there's any doubt he wouldn't have had a chance [in 1960?]. But the sentiment of a lot of people in the city of Greensboro in the black community has changed.

WC: It has changed considerably since the 1960s.

EZ: There's no question about it. And I believe you were the one that asked me the question, and I've had it asked by many people in Greensboro: How can you, with your parents in the South and you born in—how can you have such an opinion? Well, you go back into history, as far as slavery is concerned, you've had slavery long before the black slavery of the U.S. You had slavery of white to white. Romans had slaves. Persians had slaves, The Greeks had slaves. Anyone captured in a war was made a slave or worked as a slave. So slavery wasn't attributable primarily or associated with the black, and I brought that out to blacks at the discussion. They talked about, "Well, we were slaves." I said, "Well, my parents—my ancestors were slaves." I don't have any doubt about it. They came from some European nation, and there isn't a nation that wasn't conquered. England was conquered early, in the early years, by the Romans. The Romans took many of the people

there and took them over to Rome and make slaves out of them. And the Persians captured many. And so slavery isn't anything that's particularly attributable to the people. The white people were slaves long before the Negroes.

So that's not the issue. The only way I look at it is that we live in a country in which we take a tremendous amount of pride, and properly so. The country where we say that regardless of the origin of the person, regardless of his color, regardless of his race, he's the same as anyone else and he needs to be treated the same. We're making a mockery of that. I'm not looking at what I have in my mind. I'm looking at it [as] what does this nation purport or represent? And we are making a mockery of it in the eyes of the world. And this is wrong.

Now, I don't agree with Rhodesia, but I have a tremendous respect for them. At least they've come out and said, "We're not going to give the black the same rights."

[Poor sound quality to end of interview; remainder of interview not transcribed]