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William Henry Chafe Oral History Collection

INTERVIEWEE: Bob Ford

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DATE: June 17, 1977

BOB FORD: [Unclear] I've got material on the walls, and I've got literature that you can read, if you want to really go into depth in this. But I don't want to bug you too much. But anyway, I was not a [William Ashley] "Billy" Sunday [American evangelist], you know, out pounding the sawdust trail. I was just trying to run a business.

WILLIAM CHAFE: Here on [Auburn] Street?

BF: Well, we were over—we were about four blocks over, in a very Southern Baptist area, over there. And they're anti-Negro over there. And this whole thing started. What happened was that I came down here and managed the company in 1950. Then we got into financial trouble, and we sold that in 1952 to a local company. They held it for two years and then threw it back into the hands of the stockholders. Well, the stockholders were a doctor's family in West Virginia, and they threw it back to me.

Well, that was about the time of the Korean War. That was 1954, and you couldn't get a machinist to save your soul. Western Electric and the rest of them around here were gobbling them up. We were training them in our own plant, and they'd take them away from us. I couldn't get the men that I needed. One day a salesman walked in and told me that he'd been over to A&T College [now North Carolina A&T State University], there's a big sale over there. He was all thrilled about it. And I said, "How could you sell a college? What have they got over there?"

"They had a machine shop over there, and they train them."

I said, "I've never heard of that. What happened to them after you train them?"

He said, "I don't know."

I said, "Well, good gosh. If they train them, they have to go to work somewhere." I said, "I believe I'll look into that."

So the next day I went over there and I ran into this guy [Andrew] Williams. His picture is up there. He died last January. I asked him, "What happens to your graduates?"

He said, “Most of them go west or they go up north. Nobody will hire them down here.” So I told him the problem that I was having, that I needed a machinist. And he said, “I’ll get you one.”

So the next day he had me one, and I hired him. Well, that’s what blew the lid off everything. I hired him, and my shop foreman, who was a dyed-in-wool Southerner, he just came in and beat his fist on the desk and said, “You’re hiring a nigger.”

I said, “No, I’m not hiring a nigger. I’m hiring a Negro.”

“Well, I ain’t going to work with a nigger or a Negro!”

So he stormed out, and that was the end of him. He took two others with him—he took three. He took my secretary, who was my own aunt. [laughter] She said she wasn’t going to work with Africans. Well, it wound up—we had a small organization. We had three fulltime in the shop, and a part-time man who had been with us for ten or twelve years before that. He worked at night. He was a mainstay of production. Well, he walked out. We lost them all but one. There was an alcoholic from the Korean War, and the Presbyterians had asked me to help rehabilitate him, and I was doing it. He was the only one left—he and I, an alcoholic and myself. [laughter]

I went over to A&T and got hold of Williams. He was a professor. And I said, “Look, I hired your man and look what happened.”

He said, “That’s all right. We’ll run it.”

So we ran it at night for about—over a year we ran at night with the curtains pulled, he and a couple of his students. The neighbors all were furious. I got beat up one time.

WC: Who beat you up?

BF: Some character who ran the filling station over there. He had only one arm. And he backed a truck into my shop shed and busted up my air compressor. I didn’t see it happen. I just came here and the shed was torn up and the air compressor wasn’t working. Somebody told me who did it, and I went over to talk to him. It turned out that he and his partner was breaking up. His partner was downtown at that time talking to Dick Douglas, the lawyer—who is related to Douglas of the [Stephan] Douglas-[Abraham] Lincoln debates, you know—and his partner was down there trying to break the deal up. This guy had a short temper. He only had one arm. He lost it, got it sheared off in one of these old manufacturing plants here, working at night when he wasn’t supposed to be there.

Anyway, he lost his temper and slugged me twice, once in the eye and once in the jaw. He busted my glasses. My son was there. My son Tom lives in [unclear], and he came home [unclear]. He says to my wife, “That man sure did clobber Daddy.” [laughter] I could take care of myself, but I couldn’t see anything but that damned stump. I kept looking at him, and there was this stump. I knew I couldn’t hit him. So finally he picked up a 2x2 beside the door and came after me with that. Then I ran behind the car. After I

ran around three cars, he cooled off and took off. Now, I maintain he would never have done this if there hadn't been the heated situation in the neighborhood because we had hired a Negro as a machinist.

WC: Now, the shop was in the neighborhood?

BF: Yeah. But right next door was the dry cleaners with a bunch of Negroes, but they weren't working in any status level. Now, our foreman, who was white, quit. And the first thing that he did was go next door and raise hell with the dry cleaners, who were two Southern buddies of his, that I had hired a Negro and that he was out of a job. I just laid it out to them.

I'll tell you how this all evolved, because it's really peculiar. I didn't go looking for this trouble. It wound up dead center in my lap. But the Pope had written an encyclical on social justice. I would say that damned few priests ever swallowed it or ever preached it. But we had one in this town who preached it morning, noon, and night.

WC: Who was that?

BF: [Monsignor] Hugh Dolan, D-o-l-a-n. And I had been subjected to this Sunday after Sunday. So I hired this Negro machinist, and I got into that trouble. When the foreman walked out, my aunt and the rest of them, I thought, "Am I being smart? Am I making a mistake? I've got to get some help with this." So I went to see him. He was out of town. He'd gone up to work in New York somewhere. But there was a priest there, his assistant, named Bob Wilkin. Now he's retired. He's down in New Bern. He loves to fish, he's a sportsman. He's a retired priest. But he had been with the Franciscans, and he'd been in the Indian missions. He's written a book on the Indians out in Arizona. So I asked him what my options were. And he said, "You don't have many. You can do one of two things. You can tell them [the white employees] right now that you're going to hire them [the A&T students], and that if they don't like it, they'll have to leave. Or you can tell them that six months from now you're going to hire them, and give them a chance to look around."

And I said, "Well, jeepers, in six months' time they'll ruin me." I said "No, it's got to be now." I took his advice. I came back and told them that I'm going to hire them.

And that's when he said, "You're going to hire a nigger?"

I said, "No, I'm going to hire a Negro." And they walked out. Then Andy turned around and got his students, so we ran that place at night.

WC: For how long? For a year, you say?

BF: Over a year.

WC: And what happened then?

BF: Well, then—this is really humorous. You know, it's a humor that we trudge. But you couldn't find machinists around here to save your soul. And the Korean War was on, and the big manufacturers were getting all the machinists. And this Hercules Machine Company used to be over here on Church Street. There was a manager named Dickerson there. He's since died. He came in here one day. I was over at the other place, and had a couple of colored machinists running machines. And he said, "Where did you get them?"

I said, "A&T."

He said, "I can't hire machinists."

I said, "Well, why don't you go over there and get some?"

He said, "That's not a bad idea." He said, "I'm not sure that my help will like it."

I said, "Well, I had a sad experience. They're not going to like it." But I said, "The thing to do was to line them up and tell them beforehand, and then if he don't like it let him go."

So he did that, and he hired a couple of them. And then it went from his plant to another plant, so it became like a rolling stone. There was no dedication to liberate the Negro upstate or anything else. I had nothing to do with that. I was just a businessman trying to run a business and ran afoul of the fact that I couldn't hire anybody. And I found them, and the way that I was trained, I didn't see any reason why I shouldn't.

WC: How long did this continue? Do you still have—I mean, all this time you've still had black machinists?

BF: This began to smooth off after about a year. What happened, the American Friends Service Committee [AFSC]—now, if I said to you "Quakers," you'd misunderstand me. Because the American Friends Service Committee is something like the Knights of Columbus. They are a society offshoot of Quakers, but the Quaker church doesn't accept them. Do you understand me at all?

WC: Yeah, yeah.

BF: Like the Knights of Columbus. You know, they like to drink and gamble. They're arm and arm with the church for a damn [unclear]. And I'd never join them for that reason, on account it could be a pain in the ass. But anyway, they love fraternity and brotherhood, and if you got to have that to keep you going, why, go ahead, get it. Anyway, you can't identify the Knights of Columbus with the Catholic Church, anymore than you can identify the American Friends Service Committee with the Quakers. Because in the thousands of meetings I went to after this all happened, I saw the friction going on there.

The old, hard-line Quakers didn't go for this American Friends Service Committee, which started, I think, in World War I with [President Herbert] Hoover.

When I got into all this trouble, somehow or other they got wind of it, and they came to me. I love their terminology: they wanted to "buttress" me. [laughter] Don't you love that!

WC: That's good.

BF: They knew everybody walked out but an alcoholic. So they proceeded to buttress him, and boy he needed it, because my old foreman had gone to him and some others, and what they were going to do to him if he didn't quit—You know, they really wanted me down to nothing. Well, the Quakers buttressed him, and he stayed with us.

But the funny thing about it is that I got him through the Presbyterian Church. It's gone now; the highway is where the church used to be in Meadowbrook or something. He was an alcoholic in the Korean War, and they were having trouble with him. They wanted to get him located and get him stabilized, and they came to me, about two of them, two of the men. And I said, "Well, I'll give him a try." Anyway, we've had sort of a psychiatric clinic here taking on people through the years, and I've gotten all kinds of trouble. I've hired a bunch of kooks in my time. [laughter] This was one of them.

We successfully kept his feet on the ground for about five years, and then the thing blew up. But anyway, they buttressed him. Well, then they asked me if I wouldn't join this merit employment program they had. I didn't know anything about that, but I said, "Yeah, sure." So I got into it, and that's how I got on the wall there. Now, there was an architect here named Ed Lowenstein, and he got into it, but he got into it on a limited basis. As I understand it, he hired draftsmen and architects from A&T, but he put them all in a separate building.

WC: Really?

BF: Yeah. Those buildings are still there in Bessemer Avenue. To my mind, this was sort of going halfway. Trying to jump the river and falling in the middle of it.

WC: When was this, '55-'56?

BF: Yeah, it would be about '54-'55. You can get all the dates off the wall. I've got Lowenstein's picture up there. So that's how I got involved with them and merit employment. Well, I wound up as chairman of the American Friends Service Committee on merit employment hearings in Guilford County, I guess—I don't know, six or seven years. And then after we had pretty well gone through that gamut, we tried all kinds of

things. You know, trying to get Negroes hired on the basis of their knowledge and their ability, and to give them the status that they were entitled to.

WC: Who did you go to?

BF: We worked with the Quakers, and we went around to different companies and talked to them.

WC: Did you go to Burlington [Industries]?

BF: They did. They had full-time employees, see.

WC: The AFSC did?

BF: Yeah. And they would come to our meetings, and we would put the needle to them.

[Redacted comments between Ford and repairman]

BF: And that went on for years.

WC: You were head of the committee?

BF: I was the chairman. See, we were just like sergeants. The colonels and the generals were the American Friends Service Committee. A guy named Tartt Bell, he was a very clever sociologist.

WC: Do you know where he is now?

BF: No, I don't. I think he's in—he went to New York from here. But, you know, the Holy Spirit gives different gifts to different people. He had a gift of knowing what was needed and how to get the grassroots people to do it. But as an individual—just between me and you, and the gatepost—he was a very self-centered, egotistical rascal. He didn't want anybody to help him. For example, this character here in town—

Hey, Tom! Tom, are you there?

There's a guy who always gives speeches out at Guilford Memorial Park on Memorial Day and the rest of the time. There he is. McDaniel Lewis. Now, he's supposed to be the hero of the war veterans around here. He gives all these speeches and everything. He got out there in Memorial Park one day, Guilford County on Memorial Day, and gave a speech about these conscientious objectors. You know, like what "yellow bellied quitters" they were and all this. It just tore me up. I got mad, so I wrote a letter to the

public post and gave McDaniel Lewis hell. I told him, I says, "As a sergeant major in the infantry, medics in the [Big] Red One, the [U.S. Army] 1st Infantry, I've seen everything there is to see. I had an awful lot of conscientious objectors, mainly Quakers, especially in the [unclear] they get knocked off like fleas, but I never saw one turn and run. And you have done a disservice."

Well, they didn't stop writing about that in the paper for a hell of a long while. The thing that burned me up was that Tartt Bell got teed off. He said that I had made a religious issue out of it. It wasn't a religious issue. Now this is where the Quaker versus the American Friends comes in. You really—I mean you get caught between the rock and a hard place so fast in this work that it's unbelievable.

WC: [laughs]

BF: You know it, don't you?

WC: Yeah. Is McDaniel Lewis still around here?

BF: Oh, yeah. He's still giving speeches. I'll bet you that he has never smelt gunpowder when it was fired at him.

WC: He's very conservative on that race issues, isn't he?

BF: Oh, Lord, yes! Yeah, he and Stark Dillard. Stark Dillard, he's since died. A whole gang of them. They formed—I'm not sure that he was one of the members. A bunch of those bigwigs formed—

WC: The Patriots?

BF: Yeah, against the Negroes. Can you hold it for just a minute? I'll be right back.

WC: Sure.

[Recording paused]

BF: —was what I would call, within the framework of sociology, he was a militarist. He knew what he wanted, he knew what he wanted to accomplish, and he knew the people that he would need to do it. And he was hardboiled about it. And I suppose in any discipline you're going to have those types of people. But when it came to interpersonal relations, he was a pain in the posterior [unclear]. However, he had a character with him by the name of Bill Bagley, who worked on the—okay. He was a very charming

individual. He and his wife, she was in the same work, and they promoted a lot of good around here. Now, after we had been through this mess with merit employment—we used to have meetings week after week.

WC: Who else was on your committee?

BF: Well, there was Ed Lowenstein, there was myself, there was some fellow—I can't remember his name—out of the textile industry. And then we had—oh, we had—it was Bill Bagley. We had a Henry Bailey, a Negro here in town. Have you heard these names? Sarah Herbin.

WC: Sarah Herbin I have, yeah.

BF: And Dean [Samuel Cooper] Smith and his wife [Angeline] from A&T. Now, in those days, A&T, in my estimation, wasn't much above a high school level. And they had a two year course over there in the machine shop. Dean Smith was in charge of that. He was a delightful person, he and his wife. And we worked for years in that program. And then we had Kay Troxler, Dr. Troxler's wife. And then we had Gladys Royal and her husband, both doctors over at A&T. Gladys was my Achilles heel. She's the one that caused me to get out of the program. Then there was Gladys Woods[?], principal of the Negro school down in south Greensboro, a very good friend of ours. And John R. Taylor. John R. Taylor went along for a long while, but finally the dollar bill started to hit him on housing. He said it was suicide for a white builder to attempt an integrated housing project. Well, Dolan put him on the spot at one of these meetings, when he made this statement. And then from there on he sort of cooled on it. I think it was an unfair position for Dolan to put him in.

WC: So Dolan was the one who put Taylor up against the wall on the question of housing?

BF: Yeah.

WC: Wasn't Taylor being accused of being a slumlord?

BF: There was some talk of that. However, I don't think so. I don't think that Taylor was that type of character. He was building cheap housing because you could sell more of them, but I don't think he was ever a slumlord.

WC: No, I didn't say that he was. He was accused of it by somebody.

BF: Oh, he was accused of it, but Dolan didn't do that. Dolan accused him of being chicken because he wouldn't—

WC: Integrate the housing?

BF: Integrate the housing. But you know there is a certain amount of prudence involved in it. You know, even Thomas Aquinas will tell you, if there's no hope of success, you're stupid to start. And this is true. This is good psychology or theology or whatever you want to call it. So I think that Taylor was really backed into a bad corner by Dolan. But anyway, some of these frictions began to push people out of there. Then there was a Jones, a Quaker preacher, out here on Friendly Avenue church. I can't remember his first name, but he was very active with us. Dr. Warren Ashby. You know him?

WC: Yeah.

BF: He was very active. And of course this guy, Tartt Bell. And Charles Davis was probably the most active of all.

WC: Black guy?

BF: Yeah. You know him?

WC: I've met him, yeah.

BF: Yeah. He's a school teacher in South Carolina. [unclear] run out of there, I think for insisting on voting privileges or something. Then he came up here and got in with the Quakers. I mentioned Bill Bagley. Now, Mrs. George Simkins, that's the dentist's wife. She was very active, very capable, and a real lovely person. Now George I can't say the same things for, because he was always in the front with the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People]. I didn't think his depth of education and understanding of sociological problems even began to match his wife's, no way. He was sort of, what I would say, the militaristic Negro, you know, which you had to have. It's a role somebody had to play. He was playing it, but his wife was a lot smarter than he was. And she has the minutes of the meetings when I was the head of the education committee.

When they ran out of this merit employment deal, then they went into this school integration. They asked me to take the chairmanship of that. I took it. I told them that I didn't have any qualifications for it. I'm not even a college graduate. They insisted, so I took it. What they really wanted was somebody who had guts enough to stand up there and talk, and I used to tell the principals of the schools [unclear] meetings off. You know,

and in a nice way I'd put him on the spot. The 5th Circuit Court of Appeals in Florida said that this ruling meant that a child was entitled to go to his neighborhood school. And so I asked—[Phil] Weaver was his name—Weaver, I said, "What does this say to you?"

He said, "That is the Fifth Circuit Court, and this is the so-and-so circuit court, so it says nothing to me."

I said, "You want to let that answer go with that?"

And he said, "Yes."

Well, with that the head of the school committee—I forget his name now. Incidentally, he was from Chicago. And he tried to put me on the spot because of my lingo, asked me where I was from. Anyway, he said, "Well now, in answer to that question, there may be a carryover to where we have to give some consideration to what that ruling means." And he says, "If there is, we will work on it."

And I said, "Well, thank God for that answer, after that vacuity of utterances I just got from the superintendant."

I mean, this is the way I used to put it, you know. And of course the Quakers liked that. But that didn't mean that I had any expertise in education. I didn't. All I had was a desire for every kid to go to his neighborhood school.

Well, anyway, we used to go around to all the Negro churches around here. That one year we made a drive, and I think that we got 148 Negro students integrated in various neighborhood schools around here. But you know where our real problem was? Getting the Negro parents to send the kid to the school and enroll them. We went to Negro churches. We sang with them. We climbed the walls. We talked to them. This is week after week, night after night, all around here, up in Pomona, particularly. And you've got to consider the Negro parent's position. If he's going to take his child to a white school and enroll him in the neighborhood, he may lose his job. In Pomona especially, where the brick company was, they were scared to death. But we got some of them to do it. We got a 148 of them.

WC: Do you remember what year that was?

BF: Well, it would have been after '54-'55. It would have been after I got through with merit employment. It was up there. I really—my—I can't remember dates.

WC: I think it was '60-'61 or something like that.

BF: Yeah, it was in there. So we went and personally took the children of the families that we talked into it, we escorted them on the first day of school. We didn't have one single incident of anybody getting hurt or any punishment at all. Then we found out that they were in trouble, they were culturally deprived. In the first grade, in these white schools, they couldn't make it. So then we started a kindergarten, a preschool training. And we'd

go pick them up and take them to kindergarten over here at Bennett College. That went on for a year or two. Then we started study programs at night, and we had one up at the Catholic church of [Saint] Pius X, and truth makes a bloody entrance. And, boy, that was a bloody entrance. And if it hadn't been for Dolan and myself, we wouldn't have done it. What happened was that they must have labeled me as a "softy" on social issues.

The Quakers were having a donnybrook down in Dunn [North Carolina]. Those Indian kids were going thirty-some miles to school on a bus, and thirty-some miles back to [Johnston?]. The bus driver had one arm and was a mathematics teacher down there, and he didn't give them problems because he couldn't solve them himself. This is weird, but it's true. They threw a federal lawsuit at him, and they wanted to place the kids in other homes to go to school until it was solved. So they came to us. We took two Indian girls with us, and we sent them to Pius X Catholic School.

And, boy, that created a mess. The principal of that school—the nun in charge, she nearly had a fit. I worked it out with Dolan beforehand, but he was in Chicago. He was always out of town when I needed him. [laughter] I sent the two kids up there, and that Sister Superior flipped! So I got hold of Dolan. He called her from Chicago and told her to just get straightened out or pack up and get out, that those kids were going to that school. Most people are not familiar with Cherokee Indians. But if you aren't, you couldn't tell them from a Negro—some of them.

And the odd part of it is that the day they arrived at our house to live with us, my wife's relatives were here from up in West Virginia—well, it's nearer Winchester, Virginia. And they don't have much [Negros?] .And they came in the house as these kids were arriving with suitcases to live with us. Oh, I mean it was weird! It really was.

The strange part of it was that it created an awful donnybrook in that parish. Here's your richest part of Greensboro, Irving Park, and we stuck two Indians—whom most of the whites up there figured were what they called "niggers"—we stuck them in the school. We were immediately written off the social register. My wife's a doctor, a pediatrician here in town, and we were taken off the cocktail circuit right off. We were taken off of it. I come out of church, and a guy blesses me out at the foot of the steps: "A nigger-lover going too far." You wouldn't believe the nonsense that went on. What tickled me more than anything else was that Sister Superior. Now, Dolan straightened her out, and they took those two kids and they stayed there over a year. We tried to get them in Notre Dame High School, but they were so culturally impoverished there was no way they could have made it. So we put them up in the eighth grade.

Now, one of them is very successful now. She's a bookkeeper, and she's happily married. Her husband is an accountant, and they live down in Durham or Raleigh. They came to see us recently. Now the other younger sister, she's doing pretty well. She didn't finish high school, but she's going back now. But it was a good experience.

They never let us off the hook on that. I was coming back with somebody else. They got a guy from India, Calcutta, for us to take in—the Presbyterians did. He turned

out to be a Communist belonging to a cell, and the FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigations] was looking for him the day after I kicked him out of the house. He stayed with us a year. [laughter] I could go for hours, but I don't want to bore you with all this. But really, they got us into something. We got written off the social register.

But you know the real crowning insult was after I got through with years on the merit employment committee—and don't misunderstand me, I'm not griping. There isn't a thing that I did that I would have done differently, if I had it to do over again. I could have been brighter in certain areas of activity, but being a dunce to start with, I had to learn by experience. You follow me? But knowing no more than I knew then, if I had to do it over, I'd have done the same thing. But when I got into that educational deal and integrating the schools, I mean to tell you, people had no use for us. We really got written off. Written off of everything! And that included Notre Dame High School.

And over there the PTA [Parent Teacher Association] was mad at us, and they wouldn't have a prom because there were Negro students over there. See the bishop insisted that they integrate. So we had a prom at our house. We had a hell of a big house on Elm Street, fifteen rooms, three full baths, and two half-baths. We hired an orchestra, and we had the prom over there. At that time we had an exchange student from Rome, Italy, with us that the [unclear] had gotten us. This was right after we had gotten rid of the guy from India. The whole experience—we had seven children—went very well. There were problems going on downtown, and we took our little kids to see them.

[Tape error—recording becomes barely audible]

WC: Do you remember when that was in relation to when your activity on the school committee was?

BF: Still going on.

WC: Okay. That makes sense. Now, Gladys Royal was writing a report, wasn't she?

BF: Let me tell you something about that woman. You're not talking to a statue. You're talking to a human being that has all the human errors of anybody else. And you like and dislike, but she was always a pain in my posterior.

[Recording Paused]

WC: It's up there that we lose it. So I think we could summarize that by saying that Gladys Royal was objecting to the fact that you had referred to her by her first name, and that she took her protest to Charles Davis and to Henry Bailey, and that thereafter you and she did

not get along. You resigned from the education committee shortly thereafter over the issue of busing.

BF: Right. Once it came up at the next meeting, that was it. And I told them that I would not go along with busing. I did not—I didn't lose any sensitivity to what was going on. I stayed active to some extent, but I wouldn't chair the committee. But I, like everybody else, got phased out. Right then and there the phasing out started.

WC: So that coincided with the emergence of Black Power.

BF: Right. Yeah. Black Power came in.

WC: [Nineteen] sixty-five, '66.

BF: Yeah. They threw white power out. They didn't need it.

WC: Did that committee stay in existence?

BF: I think this is a normal reaction, don't you?

WC: Yeah, I do. Did that committee stay in existence as an AFSC committee?

BF: No, it was the Greensboro Citizens Fellowship.

WC: Right, Greensboro Community Fellowship.

BF: Yeah, and it fell apart. I don't think it lasted anytime after that to amount to anything. If it did, it was a powder puff activity that didn't accomplish anything. There were some interesting things that went on during that period. Have you got that on?

WC: Yeah, it's on.

BF: For example, when we integrated the schools, we ran into a lot of problems with school teachers. They had a school teacher out there at Hunter [Elementary] School, and they had this little fellow out there that I had taken to school the first day. He came from a home out in that part of Greensboro that—he only had a dirt floor; they didn't even have electricity, only candlelight. He went to the water fountain at school one day and found a ring laying there on the floor, and he picked it up. Well, it turned out it was the teacher's engagement ring, worth $900. Well, he swapped it for twelve marbles. To make a long story short, he wound up in court over it.

I got hold of Major High here in town, a Negro lawyer, to take the case. I and a couple of other fellows from the American Friends Service Committee went out to this little boy's home one frigid, cold winter night—no heat, nothing but candlelight. There was another house in the block, and most of the people in the block had gathered up there because they had a fire in the stove. We had to come back down to this empty house, frigid, because they wanted to talk privately. And Major High was going to take the case. He was typical to me of many Negroes in that time. The rich, educated Negro was completely out of touch with the poor, indigent Negro. Now I know this. My wife is a pediatrician, and she handled both the rich and the poor Negro. And they could care less. And he was so shook up that he—he practically was—he was having nervous shakes before we got him back home that night. He had to stop by and have a conference with Charles Davis to get straightened out. When he saw the wooden—the dirt floor and the candlelight and the freezing house, what happened was he dropped the case. And I had hired him, with authority from the committee, because we were going to pay him.

I had to search around. I had to go to High Point to get hold of a Negro lawyer over there, Sammy Chess to take the case. Sammy Chess is now a lawyer—a judge here in North Carolina. Now, I went to court with Sammy the day that they had the trial. The Republicans had taken over, and they had kicked out the old guy that had been in charge of domestic relations court for many, many years, and had put in this guy [Coleman?], an old man who was a Republican. He had no more sense or logic or reason of justice than a jackass. I'm not kidding you! He declared that that boy knew the value of that ring. What Sammy Chess said to him, eyeball to eyeball, "He swiped it for twelve marbles. Does he think twelve marbles are worth $900?" And the judge told him to sit down and to shut up or he would hold him in contempt of court. What he did was he pled prayer for judgment on that boy, which means from now on he is a juvenile delinquent until that is cleared up. And he still is. And that woman had lost the darned thing off her finger. Whatever happened to the ring, we will never know. We were just trying to get the boy's name cleared. The reason I mention this is that Major High is a typical example of the rich Negro backing out of the picture. Really he was shook up worse than the kid or the family was ever shook up, because he didn't know how the other half was living. This is really sad, isn't it? Well, Sammy Chess is a judge now.

But there are a lot of weird things that came out of this thing, as we went on through the course of the years. I don't think there's much else except for the kindergarten, the study club at Pius X. We finally—after Dolan got that Sister straightened out, the two Indian girls stayed there for a year. It was after that that this problem came along that these little Negroes couldn't keep up in these white neighborhood schools. We established evening study programs for them. The first one was at Pius X. It made a bloody entrance, but we got it going. We had volunteers from all faiths. It wasn't a Catholic project, just a Catholic building. But some of the Sisters did join in and tutored the children. I think that's about the end of it.

WC: You've talked about the people on this committee that you were part of, both the merit employment and the education committee. There's a kind of overlapping list there, it seems like. At least in most cases, some of the same names were on both committees.

BF: They were. They were. You see, what the Quakers were doing—well, I shouldn't say Quakers—the American Friends Service Committee, they were finding people of goodwill who wanted social change, and they were directing them into fields of activity where they could accomplish this. Now, to think of it, the American Friends Service Committee sitting there in their office in High Point knew what should be done. Now there is a mystery of faith. How is it that God pipelined it into them, and all the rest of your Christians sitting around paying no attention? But He did. And they went out into the community and found people that they could pipeline into on a grassroots level and got them activated. This is my theory of how this thing suddenly started.

For example, I was the farthest removed from any kind of sociological activist as you could be from number one on the ruler to number twelve. I didn't know anything about this, but I suddenly got hit with a problem in my conscience. Here a guy wants a job, he's got the qualifications, and I can't hire him? And I spent five years in the army, and three years overseas in combat, but because of a bunch of kooks I can't hire this guy? I thought no, no way. I wanted to get the moral issue straightened out, and I did with Father Bob Wilkin. And when he gave it to me, I just followed it. That was it.

Now I maintain that a lot of this grassroots level activity came from pulpits, not any given church. But I do think that the Pope's encyclical on social justice had been picked up by many other churches, including the synagogues. It at least had made them aware that injustice was all around them every day. It began to come from the pulpit. And through awakened consciences on the grassroots level, people began to demand what belonged to them and others began to insist on helping them get it. And I think that is where your grassroots movement is.

WC: Your committee, with those liberals on it, black liberals and white liberals, what kind of support did you feel you had in the rest of the community?

BF: Very little. Very little.

WC: Where would you look for your allies?

BF: Well, to be perfectly frank with you, I think a lot of people envied us, the fact that we had guts enough to do it. By the same token, they didn't want to be too closely identified with us. We had—we were socially active. My wife's a doctor, and I'm the manager of a manufacturing plant. We got around, but the invitations just disappeared.

WC: How about the YWCA [Young Women's Christian Association]? Was the YWCA supportive?

BF: The YWCA was our main meeting place, for many years—the old one, before they built the new one. We used to meet down there most of the time, in an upstairs room. Like the Last Supper, in an upstairs room. And they were very cooperative.

WC: How about the YMCA [Young Men's Christian Association]?

BF: I don't ever recall having a meeting in the YMCA—never, never.

WC: When you were head of the merit employment committee, whatever happened with the power structure of Greensboro—the Cones, the Spencer Loves—

BF: Nothing.

WC: —the people in Western Electric? Do you know what happened when people on the staff went to those places and talked about merit employment?

BF: They got frozen out. The whole thing was this: those big companies could well have afforded to make these changes. Who could hurt them? And yet they wouldn't do it. And I'm certain that it was upper-crust social—a desire to remain in the social upper structure. Even a guy in charge of, let's say, Cone Mills or Burlington or anywhere else, if he made a decision to do this, people were going to criticize him. So when he goes to the country club, like over here and a few other rich people can, he's going to be behind the eight ball, right? Now, what did he have to lose by that? Nothing! You know, really. But it was only the little companies who did it.

WC: Who else besides yourself?

BF: Hercules Machine over on Church Street did it. Then after Hercules, a couple other little machine shops around town did it. But honestly, I'm getting old. I'm sixty-three, and my mind is slipping me.

WC: But they were machine shops. How about places with clerical workers, secretarial staffs, things like that?

BF: No, I don't think—I don't recall any of that.

WC: How about banks, department stores?

BF: No, this came later. This came later. You know, most of it only came—and this is one of the mysteries of this whole movement—most of it only came from the top, from the federal government. When you stop and think that most of the—you're talking about executive people, big people in North Carolina, who wouldn't make a move. I know that Dolan went after them personally. He went after those wheels, and they just brushed him off. It never came until it came from the top down, from the federal government. And they got the law behind them. This is disgraceful really, because these people could have done it without getting hurt. Now, we could have gone out of business. But, you see, I moved down here, and my wife and I bought this place about the time all this was started. It belonged to us, and all I had to lose was the damned place. And it wasn't that big at that time. I'd rather lose the damned business than lose my soul.

WC: Is Dolan still around?

BF: Yeah, he's down in Charlotte.

WC: In Charlotte?

BF: He's pastor of a parish down there. You ought to talk to him.

WC: Yes, I want to do that. Wilkins you said is down in New Bern?

BF: Bob Wilkins is at New Bern. Dolan would know where he is. He's retired. It would be nice if you could get hold of this Reverend Jones. I don't know his first name. He's a Quaker. He stayed close with us.

Now, some of my experiences with Quakers were really weird. Their theology and their philosophy is entirely different from us Catholics. I used to go to their retreats at here at the Friends Meeting House, out here on New Garden Road. But sometimes they get weirdoes. Now they had a psychiatrist from up in Philadelphia, up in Pennsylvania.

You can cut that if you want.

WC: I'm just watching it to see when it stops.

BF: This guy was a psychiatrist named Murphy—no, as I recall, he was a turncoat. How the hell did he get the name Murphy? [laughter] But anyway, he gave a long dissertation, a retreat, on Saturday morning and Saturday afternoon. And he'd sit there grunting and groaning like he was having a hard BM [bowel movement], for five or ten minutes before he'd utter a word, and then he would come out with a statement. Then you were supposed

to think about that for a while. He maintained that there was no such thing as morality. Now, Tartt Bell's wife was sitting there, and boy, she leaped up and [unclear] the light. She was so happy to finally hear that. And Tartt was sitting there. [unclear] You know, that was weird. The stuff they'd come out with.

Well, Jones, this minister I'm telling you about—I had a migraine headache that day. If I get real angry, I get a migraine headache. For the last ten years, I don't. But when I was younger, I did. I was so damned mad at that nonsense that there is no morality. It was break time, lunchtime, and I went in the john, and Jones was in the next stall. And he says, "What do you think of this kook?" That's just what he said.

I said, "Well, I'll be honest with you. I think he needs to see a psychiatrist himself. He's nuts."

He said, "You better believe it. And I'm not hanging around. I'm getting out of here."

I said, "Well good. That makes two of us." And we both left.

I never could find the central core of the Quakers' belief. But if you talk to a Quaker, the American Friends Service Committee had nothing to do with the Quakers, you know. So you sort of flounder around and you can't get anywhere talking with them. I really admired some of them. Those people were terrific. When those Quakers got a hold of something they thought needed to be, boy, I'm telling you they would go at it with tenacity. If every Christian and every Jew was as dedicated to his belief as they were, we wouldn't be having any problems today.

WC: That's right. Tell me about the Klan. Was there a big Klan here?

BF: Ku Klux Klan? Oh, yeah. You had the strongest White Citizens' Council of anywhere in the South here, founded by Stark Dillard, who has since died. He had Dillard Paper Company and a few others.

Tom, do you know who else was on the White Citizen's Council?

T: No, I was too young then. I wouldn't have no idea.

BF: All I know is that Stark Dillard was the ringleader. But a lot of other big money men here in town was with him. But the Klan never got out in uniform—

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

BF: —they're now all torn down. The brick company is gone from there. But those people all lived in these crummy little company houses.

WC: And they were afraid of getting fired if they—

BF: Yeah.

WC: Which company was it?

BF: I think it was Pomona Terra Cotta.

WC: Pomona Terra Cotta.

BF: Yeah. And some of them have been living there for years and years. One of them, a little [Hazelette?] family—little Billy Hazel, about that high, I used to take him to kindergarten. I took him to school the first day. His daddy had died, and his granddaddy was raising him. He was ninety or so. Cutest old man you ever saw, and Billy was the spitting image of him, real cute. We picked those kids up and took them to school for a couple of days, and then we took them to study clubs and all this. The fright was on the part of the Negro mother more than on the father, because oddly enough the father quite frequently just wasn't in the picture. You know, Negro families aren't stable. This goes back to slavery. The mother's the boss, if you don't know it. As a sociologist, you probably do. Even today, the Negro woman runs the family.

WC: So the mothers would be afraid of losing their jobs.

BF: Very frightened of losing their jobs, or if they had a husband living with them, of him losing his job, or both of them. Jeepers, I can't count how many times we went out there to those churches, and we would get up and talk and try to influence them, sing their songs, climb their walls. It was very inspiring, really was to us. You find out how little these people had, but in other areas how much more they had than we had.

WC: Now what church did you go to? Where was this strong support coming from in the black community, in terms of the churches? Which churches were the best?

BF: Well, I really—denominationally speaking, I don't know. I can tell you who the Negroes were that were the strongest: Charles Davis and Mr. and Mrs. Dean Smith, and Sarah Herbin and Henry Bailey. What their church affiliation was, I really don't know.

WC: How about ministers like—

BF: I'll just tell you this much. When it came to the Catholic Church among the Negro community, I don't know a darned soul, except one, Gladys Woods. She was very strong. She was at every meeting. She was a school teacher, and she went to St. Mary's Church.

In the whole civil rights movement, I'd say Catholics were noticeable by their absence. I hate to say it.

WC: How about people like Otis Hairston and Cecil Bishop?

BF: They were active.

WC: Julius Douglas?

BF: Cecil Bishop was very active. Otis Hairston was active.

WC: Did they work with your committee at all?

BF: Yeah. They'd come to the meetings. But the funny thing was that they didn't always agree. You wouldn't expect them to be in agreement. Well, now, for example, this fellow Weaver down in Durham. He's head of a big insurance company down there, or a bank.

WC: Wheeler[?].

BF: Wheeler, yeah. He was disruptive at times. For example, we couldn't get Negroes placed in a decent job around here, you know, outside of janitorial, service jobs. Now, I'm not talking about the educated people; they're all teaching school somewhere. But that vast layer in between there, we were trying to fill it some way or other. I remember that at one meeting I suggested—and I had a couple of other people back of me; I think Charles Davis was backing me up—we wanted to get the members of the committee to go out and contact certain manufacturers around here and see if we can promote them to adopt high school students in part-time work and summertime work, and then when they get through high school, full-time work. Well, Wheeler put this lid on that as totally unnecessary. Well, at a time when they were getting nothing, to me it was better than nothing. No, he would have no part of it. They were going to have full, open rights, or nothing. It turns out that he's wrong. They've got full, open rights, but they still don't have the opportunity to work, on-the-job training. And they're still getting the substandard education, as far as I'm concerned, wherever they're going to school.

I believe that God loves everybody the same. I don't think there's any difference. I think it would have to be an idiot to think He made everybody the same. He didn't. One is a mathematician, one's an artist, one's a linguist, and on down the line. Certain races have certain capabilities in certain areas the others do not have. I think probably the smartest race on the face of the earth is the Jewish. They've been at it longer—education, culture, you know, and family.

Family, that's the most important thing. And the poorest race here in America today, in my opinion, is the Negro because of the lack of a stable family life. And they're never going to attain the ability to achieve their top level with their capabilities in this particular country until they can grow up based on a solid family life. And you don't have it. The father is usually missing. My wife's records at home, you wouldn't believe it. You've got more Negro families with kids with three or four last names. There is no stability to the Negro family around here, except on the college level. And even there, Gladys Royal and her husband are separated. [laughs]

You're going to swear up and down that I've got a vendetta against her. I haven't. But she typified to me the real problem: a false goal, a false summit. Why fight for a label, for the name? There's no dignity in that.

WC: Tell me about—if you had—who were the enemies that you saw at that time in the white community? Who were the people you resented the most?

BF: Well, I didn't resent anybody, but I felt sorry for most of my white friends because they thought I was a renegade. And as I told many of them, in discussions—you know we used to have discussion clubs—I said, "You sit in the same pew. You read the same gospel. You hear the same sermon. How can you get a different meaning out of it than I do, when you cannot prove that I'm wrong?" This is what bugged me. I knew what was going on: going to church was a social affair. There was a status quo of keeping up a picture, but they weren't living it.

WC: On the school committee—

BF: Not that I'm any damned saint beside them. Don't misunderstand me. But by the same token, when it comes down to basics in human relations, the Ten Commandments, you can't stretch them like a rubber band. But everybody was doing it.

For example, maids, housemaids—hiring them for practically nothing. We insisted on paying them a decent wage or we wouldn't hire them. I told my wife, "If we couldn't afford a maid at a decent wage, we're not going to have one." Well, we haven't had a maid now for six or seven years; we've been out living out in the country. But the last maid that we had, I think we paid her ninety-five dollars a week, plus her meals, plus free medical care for the kids, and she had a bunch of them. I don't think that's too bad. If you want to go back and check what they were paying in those days, you won't believe it.

WC: In terms of—you talked about the school committee and chairman when Weaver was superintendent. Were there any people on that school committee who were your allies?

BF: [unclear] Weaver was a slave. He was a subject of that school board. He was scared to death of them. Whatever they said, he did it. I have seen him—he and I were having an argument. I have seen him publicly fight with his conscience, because I knew that what he was telling me he didn't believe. This was going on everywhere. People were just not going according to their conscience. They were going according to what they thought they ought to say. Now, let me tell you something. Some of my own ministers were my enemies. Fathers thought I was a kook, my wife was a kook.

WC: Who were they?

BF: One of them, Father—what was his name? He was over here at [Our] Lady of Grace [Catholic Church]. He's since left the priesthood. He's living down in Charlotte now. Sullivan, Walter Sullivan. He came to our house one night and gave us a fit, you know. I finally told him, I said, "Look, Father, I don't give a damn what their color is. One soul is the same to me as the other, and they're all entitled to their rights and entitled to Christian justice and charity. That's it."

And he says, "You've been brainwashed." He got up and stormed out of the living room and left. [WC laughs] I can understand why he left.

WC: Yeah. He had to get out of the priesthood fast.

BF: Right. Then we had the heads of the Parent Teacher Association at Notre Dame High School. Two of them came over there, the president and the vice president, in my living room, and chewed us out because we had integrated social life at Notre Dame. We had had a bonfire over there, hotdogs and all this, and then we had that dance. They said that we were going too far.

WC: Wasn't the [Waldo] Falkeners' child—

BF: Oh, yeah.

WC: —in that first group of children at Notre Dame?

BF: Yeah, she was there. The mother was there more than the kid. She was the problem.

WC: Why was that?

BF: Well, she's obsessed with her capability. If you've ever heard her give a talk, she'll use ten—she'll use ten-syllable words where a three-syllable word would suit fine. She's always been putting on a show.

Then her husband was on the [Greensboro] City Council, and he and I tied into each other. I told him that I'd never vote for him again for dogcatcher. There was a Negro family right down the street here, septic tank running over. The city wouldn't let them replace it, and the city wouldn't fix it. And the city wouldn't tie in their water because they had a waiting line. Across the street was a rich Negro contractor putting up a whole mess of houses, and he was getting all the treatment from the city. I went after Falkener, who was on the city council, to straighten that mess out. I went out there and you couldn't stand the odor of that crap running down the front lawn. They had to live with it for heaven knows how long. He promised me three times that he would go out there and see it, and I found out that he was lying to me. He never went out there. So then I went to a white member of the council, and I had things straightened out in two days. No, he was a climber. The Negroes finally got wise to him. He lost out in the next election. He couldn't win the election for anything.

His poor wife was—she was a beautiful looking woman, but she had ideas of grandeur that she couldn't back up. And she was a disturbing element, to be perfectly frank.

WC: How about someone like Dr. [George] Evans? Now there's a—

BF: Oh, he's a wonderful man.

WC: He was on the school board during this time that you're talking about.

BF: Yeah. He did the best that he could. But Dr. Evans is one of the most polished gentlemen with a soft voice, who never did get really angry. He never could lay it out like it ought to be laid out. He was an ally I had on the school board when we were fighting. I used to go to those meetings and stir things up, and always had Evans behind me. He was a real gentleman.

WC: When you went to those meetings—your committee and you—would there also at the same time be committees from the NAACP or from the Dudley PTA or from the Lincoln [Junior High] PTA who would be also raising hell?

BF: I don't believe so. If they were, they were there in the audience. But the only ones that ever really spoke up were the ones that belonged to our American Friends committee. I don't remember anybody else there sounding off.

WC: What, if any, feelings did you have for McNeill Smith?

BF: Well, we—

[Chafe's notes on an article about Ford and Tartt Bell are redacted.]

BF: But anyway, this is a different story. But you asked me about McNeill Smith. I'm just telling you I think he's a terrific person. I'm just unhappy with him, and so is my wife lately, because he has dropped the one project that we had our heart and soul in. And he was the only one making any progress in it.

WC: How about—did they have many dealings with the newspaper, with [William] Snider or [Edwin] Yoder, or—

BF: Oh, yeah. We've had any number of articles in that newspaper. Our best friend there was Steve Murray. Do you know him?

WC: No.

BF: Well, he's terrific. He's a good man. They've had two recent murders down in Murdoch [Center], and I don't know how many pregnancies. It's just weird. But that's a whole new period. But we're working on it. That's my campaign right now. I'm out of race problems, and I'm in the retarded. I'm going to stay with it to the bitter end, until we get a different deal there. We should have smaller units based around the state, where the child is not separated so long from his family. The service clubs and this church—it's rare that a patient at Murdoch has a clergyman from his own church ever visit him. I don't care whether it's Catholic, Methodist, Episcopalian, Presbyterian, or what it is. You'll have a few interested clergymen down in that area that will go there. They have a song deal on Sunday. But those kids are forgotten by their families, they're forgotten by the community, they're forgotten by the clergy, they're forgotten by the State of North Carolina. They could care less, until you get a murder. There have been two murders this spring. One paraplegic down there gets pregnant, and the head of the institution, Dr. Elliot, says, "I cannot—." Now listen to this wording. As a sociologist, you ought to love this. "I cannot conceive of how this happened." [laughs] Then in the next breath, he says, "It must have been a member of the staff."

[End of Interview]