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**William Henry Chafe Oral History Collection**

INTERVIEWEE: John Foster and Mrs. John Foster

INTERVIEWER: William Chafe

DATE: February 14, 1973

Note: Only a partial audio recording was available for this interview. Therefore, CRG cannot guarantee the accuracy of the transcript following the end of the tape recording.

WILLIAM CHAFE: How long have you been on the school board? When did you first—

JOHN FOSTER: Nineteen forty-eight.

WC: And was anything at all in the air at that time?

JF: Yes. As a matter of fact, when I first went on, there already were indications. I think you've got to go back just a step prior to that to understand what I'm going to relate. The State of North Carolina has a provision—with which I disagree. And some of this is off the record, we are just talking—that any monies budgeted must be spent within the fiscal period. Well, of course, during the World War II period and the Korean [War] period, number one, materials were not available, and two, the money could not be spent to construct schools. So therefore, when I first went on the board, we were considerably behind in school construction with no funds, appreciable funds, for capital purposes. We went into a bond issue, which I have over there if you'd be interested in seeing it.

And knowing that this thing was coming then, having obtained success in the bond issue and capital money becoming available, we immediately went to work. And if you'll analyze that period of the money coming in, a substantial portion of it was spent on the Negro schools. The "separate but equal" doctrine we hoped might prevail. But we had to admit that prior to this capital expenditure of money, they were not separate but equal. So we were trying in the early days after the '48 bond issue to bring the capital building situation in the Negro areas up to the standards in the white schools. And as I say, the attention was focused in improvement of the existing Negro schools as well as the new

Negro schools which were built. Then when we hit—that is, anticipating this, when '54 came, we thought we would be ready to substantiate a separate but equal doctrine.

WC: In other words, the way in which you allocated your expenditures in 1948 from this capital fund was consciously connected to the idea of defending the separate but equal system against court challenge.

JF: Yes.

WC: This was—was this the primary rationale for it or—for the allocation of funds?

JF: If you want the picture, I'll get some papers. I think I can—

WC: Okay.

[Recording paused]

JF: The capital wasn't directed. That is, we didn't make a big noise about it being directed in that area, but very calmly proceeding to improve the Negro schools.

WC: Yeah. So there was an anticipation that this issue was going to come to the surface and that you were preparing for it.

JF: Yes. Always bearing in mind that we hoped to follow the separate but equal doctrine.

WC: How do you personally feel about that? Do you have any qualms about that?

JF: About what?

WC: About the separate but equal doctrine itself? Did you think it had a chance of being upheld, and did you approve of it?

JF: I thought that perhaps it might be upheld at that time under the existing—under the Supreme Court as it existed at that time. But so far as my personal feelings were concerned, I felt that it would be better for the Negro student—and the white student, for that matter—to continue under the separate but equal theory. Obviously, in my thinking—and I think it was basic—the Negro teaching standards and the education of the Negro at a given grade-level would not measure up to the same standards in the whites. So therefore, as I saw it, the white had to be—you couldn't bring the Negro level

up, so you had to bring the white down, which would be of no great benefit to either the white or the black.

WC: Maybe you could talk a little bit about what you saw happening in the early fifties and as you came up to the *Brown* [*v. Board of Education*] decision, and how you think of those days now in recalling them and how you thought of them at the time.

JF: As we came up to the *Brown*—prior to the *Brown* decision?

WC: Prior to and then subsequent to it.

JF: Of course, prior to the *Brown* decision, I think we have to go back a step or two as it relates to the Supreme Court. The [Franklin D.] Roosevelt court might, in my opinion, might have let us proceed on a basis of separate but equal, but the changes which came about after Mr. Roosevelt's packing—actually that he accomplished without having to get him an amendment—became a more liberal group, and I didn't think after the subsequent Supreme Court came in that the liberal aspect of the court could possibly accept the separate but equal doctrine. Now, also I recall very definitely—I usually went to Florida fishing in March, and I recall so vividly going through the lower part of Georgia into Florida and observing, as we went down the highways—of observing the poor, terrible, unbelievable, really, situations that applied—little outhouses behind these rustic buildings. And while I hoped that we in North Carolina could do something, I knew that the Supreme Court would have to look at it from the overall picture, and there again we got into the situation where we couldn't—North Carolina couldn't pull the Georgia up, but Georgia could and did pull North Carolina down, in my opinion, nationwide. I don't blame it all on Georgia. We had some, too, and South Carolina had some.

WC: [laughs] Well, when the decision came down, it was no longer a surprise to you, I take it—when the court, in that May day, came down with the *Brown* decision.

JF: May 17, 1954. And peculiarly enough, that was the night—that was the day, rather, of our regular school board meeting that night. The decision came out on May 17, and our school board meeting that night—and this is in the minutes you may have run across—we adopted a resolution in effect saying that we would follow the law of the land, which we were sworn and we accepted as a matter of our duty, our responsibility, under the oath. That resolution is recorded in that meeting, and it was just coincidental that the meeting happened to come on the day of the release of the Supreme Court decision. Not that we hadn't anticipated, but it actually became the fact of the land.

WC: Had you talked in advance of the need to take a stand immediately?

JF: Not as such, no. We were relatively calm and quiet about it. We may have discussed it a little bit among ourselves, knowing that the inevitable was coming eventually.

WC: How did you see your responsibility as a school board at that point, in terms of the total community? What were your goals at that point?

JF: Our goals always, of course, in any matter, we hoped, would be for the best interest of the educational system in Greensboro and in North Carolina for that matter. So I can say that overall, that was our basic principle. At the same time, I think in the back of our thinking was, what I had just mentioned, the differential between the two and the obvious fact that the only place anything could give would be from the top.

WC: Was there dissention in the board that night?

JF: The night of May 17?

WC: Yes.

JF: You'll find that the resolution was adopted unanimously with the exception, and I believe he abstained, if I recall correctly. He did not vote negative. There was not a negative vote registered. But Mr. Holderness, Howard Holderness—who was then president of the Jefferson Standard Life Insurance Company, and from Tarboro—my wife's hometown in eastern Carolina—expressed an opinion that we might be acting overtly a little too fast. He wasn't vehemently opposed, but he just thought maybe we were jumping the gun a bit.

WC: But beyond that I know that sometimes votes do not necessarily reflect—in other words, someone might vote positively, while at the same time not necessarily agreeing completely. I just wondered whether it was a kind of solid commitment on the board that the vote—

JF: I think I'll answer that question by saying that we—most of us, at least, did it because we knew that we had taken an oath to follow the laws of the State of North Carolina, not inconsistent with the federal laws. Obviously, there was an inconsistency that might exist. It was not—it wasn't what you might call a real solid, firm vote. It was more or less to sort of ease our conscience maybe or that type of thing. And, of course, at that time nobody anticipated what "deliberate speed" might eventually mean.

WC: What did you think that decision meant?

JF: The *Brown*?

WC: The *Brown* decision, yeah.

JF: What did I—

WC: How did you interpret the meaning of that decision? In other words, as a school board member in 1954, what did you think that was going to require? What did it signify to you that the court was saying?

JF: Well, of course, we thought—and I think this was generally true, throughout North Carolina at least—that the principles of what eventually became to be the Pearsall Plan would be the answer: that is, freedom of choice, and what I might—what I thought at least would be a control of the situation.

WC: Would you elaborate on what you mean by control?

JF: Assigning, in other words—I can get to that a little later in sequence—but selecting students, Negro students, that had outstanding, for their race, qualifications which would enable them to infiltrate or enter into the white groups, which generally had a higher IQ and so on. And we had an actual instance of that, which I will get to at the appropriate time.

WC: So that you did not see this as an immediate process.

JF: No, no. That was pretty obvious [laughs] as long as it took to eventually accomplish even one.

WC: Right. And yet the immediacy with which the board made its resolution of compliance, pledging compliance, and set up a committee immediately to study this thing—did you at that point expect that it would take as long as it did?

JF: As a matter of fact, I think that I possibly hoped that it would take longer than it did, and perhaps eventually never become as serious—if that's the proper word—as it did. And I mentioned that by having control that we could keep a lot of dissention and a lot of unfavorable—what some people at least would consider to be unfavorable—bringing into an educational system inferior products, in other words.

WC: So that you saw your function—again I'm speaking more about the board now than about yourself personally; we'll talk about your own point of view a little bit later—you saw the board—Would this be correct to say: you saw the board as, in a sense, trying to keep the lid on a situation and to regulate the situation in a manner which would ensure stability?

JF: Yes, yes.

WC: That's a fair representation of what you think that—

JF: That's true. As a matter of fact, I think it's at least worthy of noting that we had one lady—or a lady—we had one female member of the board, who was a very competent, capable person who was a Quaker. And, of course, her position was understood before anybody ever queried her. We also had another member of the board at that time, a doctor, fine, one of the finest Negro gentlemen in this part the country, and who did a service during his tenure in this situation. He didn't betray his people.

WC: This is Dr. [William] Hampton?

JF: Dr. Hampton. He was level-minded, and he set in on every one of our conferences.

WC: How did he respond to the situation? Would he—How would he behave when you were considering something like this, or considering applications?

JF: Very intelligently. I remember distinctly—I have the applications here, copies of them—when we finally got to the point where we knew we had—the deliberate speed had expired and we had to do something. He was our liaison between our group and the Negro group, the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] and others, even though he wasn't terrifically active in the NAACP. He had led the ticket, incidentally, in the councilman election when he was elected to the city council. But he would sit and listen and participate very intelligently. When these applications came in, he knew which ones were the ones that would be able to make the grade from a standpoint of intelligence. He wasn't derogatory of two children, I recall, who were the sons of a barber. And one was particularly—couldn't even pass work in his Negro school. And I remember Dr. Hampton speaking out that he thought it would be better to leave that child where he was than to bring him into the system, because he couldn't even pass at the Negro level. He was realistic about the situation and helped us tremendously.

WC: So that you would look to him for guidance, in some respects, on this issue?

JF: If we wanted something to be passed to the proper person in the Negro community, Dr. Hampton was capable of doing it. They respected him, NAACP or not.

WC: What would happen in a situation where he would disagree with you? Did that happen very frequently?

JF: I can't recall any serious disagreement. He didn't betray his people. He stood up for his people, and we recognized that and respected it, frankly. I can't recall any time that he was seriously opposed.

WC: What did you see the position of the Negro community as being at this time, in terms of this whole issue?

JF: Well, of course, I think that there you've got to take a little background, too. As I said, we could spend a week.

WC: Right. Well, we should. [laughs]

JF: Greensboro was unusual in that we had five colleges right here, as you well know. A&T College [now North Carolina A&T State University] had a very highly-educated group of professors. Several of them were imported, one I recall from Texas, who we'll discuss a little bit later, who is assigned for the ROTC [Reserve Officers' Training Corps] unit out here. And he took a position that if they gave an inch, they were moving backward. Anything that appeared to him to be moving backward one inch, he would fight it, and did in many cases, when that one inch might have been to the advantage of the overall situation. The average—that is, forgetting about the professional group—the average Negro in Greensboro didn't want it. Just as they didn't want busing. The average Negro in Greensboro today doesn't want busing.

WC: How was this expressed? I mean, how would you arrive at this judgment?

JF: By the girl that works for you, by the fellow that drives the truck for you, by the janitor in your business, by—I won't refer to them as corn-fed, field Negros, but that, generally speaking, is the—In the Negro group at that time—and I think it's still pretty generally true—there is either a level here or a level here, but nothing here. I'll give you an example. We had a—and still have him working for my company—a fine man. As a matter of fact, if his color were white, he'd probably be an officer in that company today—very capable. At the time, this thing was going on and getting a lot of publicity. This was a little than we're talking about now, but this is to give you an example of what they were thinking. He came from in the neighborhood of Spartanburg, South Carolina.

And when his mother read some of these things—of course, it hit AP [Associated Press] and UPI [United Press International] and everything else—she called him when one thing became particularly hot, I remember. It looked like there might be some stick fighting and brick throwing going on. She called him on the telephone from South Carolina and told him not to go. "Don't you go. You go to work. Don't you go any place downtown, and don't you go out of the house once you get home." And that was how the felt—most of them felt about it at that level.

WC: Now, so that—Was it the NAACP, which was the largest group, involved in the protests? Were there other groups in addition to that?

JF: Well, of course, the NAACP group is hard to define. [laughs] It's sort of like some of the union members I know about that are members of the union according to the union, but they never pay any union dues. I think that situation generally applies to the NAACP. They may be members, but they're not, by the best definition, NAACP members. Of course, the NAACP, Dr. [George] Simkins—a dentist here in Greensboro; you've probably seen his name in this research—was a little bit to the obnoxious side. Dr. Hampton handled him very well. The guy from Texas, that was overbalanced. The NAACP as a unit, I can't recall anything that came to us as a resolution, shall we say, from the NAACP, but various members of the NAACP, either in operation among themselves or individually, yes. But no, there weren't meetings of the NAACP and a lot of stuff coming directly from them as an organization.

WC: How about the black parents in the community, the black—?

JF: Well, there again, I think essentially that the same thing would apply that I've just related. At that level, they didn't want it. They didn't want it.

WC: One of the things that—

JF: I think they were dubious. I think they were just as dubious of this thing working as the white at that level, just as dubious as they could be. Of course, you've got—basic, too, in my thinking: the real problem, the real crux of the problem, the heart of the problem, in my thinking, was the economic level. That is, you could put a Negro operating a lathe here and a white man operating one here, and there's no particular conflict. But let that Negro get a promotion, then it hit the economic level, and there's where the thing starts. It was the parents, not the kids.

WC: In other words, the kids get along.

JF: Yeah.

WC: The parents—

JF: When they went home and heard their parents—that's just like Santa Claus. They'd only heard about Santa Claus, and they believed in Santa Claus.

WC: [laughs] It's very true. Oh dear. My four-year-old son just for the first time saw Santa Claus this Christmas. We took him to a big department store at South Square Mall. He had a hard job reconciling that Santa Claus with the Santa Claus's who were all around. [laughter] Oh, dear.

One of the things I noticed in going through the school board minutes was that it seemed to me that in the years '54, '55, '56, the Dudley [High School] PTA [Parent Teacher Association] and the Lincoln [Middle School] PTA were coming to the board meetings awfully frequently. And, it seems to me, more so—in other words, that there was some kind of a speed-up in terms of their making demands on the board. Most of these demands didn't have much to do with integration, but they did have to do with the gymnasium—

JF: Well, they took every opportunity to emphasize the very thing that we had tried to overcome in our capital program. They emphasized their deficiencies. I'll give you an excellent example of that.

The senior high school—at that time, [Greensboro, now Grimsley] Senior High School, had been conducting their basketball games and inside gymnastic activities in an old WPA [Works Progress Administration]-built—we called it a barn, an old wooden building. At Dudley High School, which was a Negro high school, they had a gymnasium. True, it wasn't modern, but it was not a barn. It was a brick structure, and at the time it was built it was very fine. But at the time it was built, they didn't have this fast basketball, you know, and the courts were not—the clearance was not very great.

Well, we got to a point—This will give you an illustration of what you were questioning. We got to a point where we had to do something about the old barn. As a matter of fact, it was condemned and everything else. They couldn't have interior games. That was all there was to it. So we had to proceed with the building of a new gym at Senior, which we did. It was a very fine building. And, incidentally, there was quite a history there, too, that we wanted to go into it. But upon completion of that building—a very fine gymnasium, which you probably have seen—we scheduled basketball games and interior activities.

Well, we were approached—at about the same time, A&T University had also constructed and recently completed at that time a brand new gym, which was really more ornate and fancier than we could afford to build. We were approached by some of the

Negroes—particularly this Texan I referred to—to let them use the gym, the new gym at Senior High, rather than their old gym at Dudley. Well, we explained to them that we had scheduled and so on for the rest of the season ahead. You have to. And they asked if we would consider it. Well, we told them of course we would. We contacted the A&T authorities, and they agreed that they would rent us the new A&T gym for janitorial services, lights, and various things, heat, that go along with it, a minimum outlay cash expense. And that was right in the center of the Negro community. So the next thing we did, we met with them and said, "Okay, now, we can give you—let you have the A&T gym for your games, subject of course to their possible schedule conflicts. And it will be nearer; you won't have to go five or six miles to the new Senior gym. It's got better facilities, and we feel it would be fine for you." Oh, no. Nope. This Texan particularly, he led the group.

So finally the group at Dudley called a meeting of the PTA. They had twenty-six people—twenty-seven people there, various organizations: PTA, the student council, and every organization relating or having any connection to the school system. And they invited Ben Smith, who was then superintendent, and asked me if I would attend. I said, "Sure." I ate with them trying to get the bond issue passed. I didn't have any particular grievance. So we did meet with them. I'll never forget this. They discussed pro and con. There was one group that felt that the A&T gym would be ideal because they wanted to go to the games. It would be more convenient and so on. But the Texas boy and a group with him—this is the guy that didn't want to give an inch. He felt that if they accepted the A&T gym, then they would be in effect yielding some of their already attained power. And, oh, he opposed very strongly, and the group with him.

So finally Dr. [John A.] Tarpley [Dudley High School principal], who was presiding, and the Negro girl there taking the notes, the minutes—so Dr. Tarpley says, "Madame secretary, will you prepare some ballots?" So this little Negro gal took some paper and tore it into strips. "Madame secretary, will you pass the ballots." I've told this story to some of my friends many times, because I saw it. I was there. The little girl was passing these slips of paper around. She offered one to me, and I abstained and Ben abstained. We waited a few minutes and Dr. Tarpley says, "Madame secretary, will you take up the ballots?" And the little gal goes around taking these slips of paper up. "Will you count the ballots—tally," he said, "tally the ballots." [stamps foot]

"Dr. Tarpley," she says, "the vote is twelve to twelve."

Dr. Tarpley just sat there and looked a little chagrined. And the Texas guy spoke up and he said, "Dr. Tarpley, did you vote?"

Dr. Tarpley says, "The meeting is adjourned."

[laughter] I know. He wasn't going to take that responsibility. But anyhow, we finally let them have it. I digressed a bit there to illustrate a point.

WC: You finally arranged with the—

JF: Yeah, we let them have it.

WC: Was this unusual? I mean, were you surprised at the frequency of these visits in ‘54 and ‘55?

JF: No, I wasn’t surprised.

WC: Was it different from what it had been in the period before ‘54?

JF: Yes, different in the nature of the request and different in the personnel appearing. The personnel appearing prior, when the infrequent times that they may have come before the board—did come before the board, they were representatives of the PTA, maybe two or three people, very understanding. But then post-[*Brown*] decision time, the group then became not particularly militant, but just as the Texas boy, a group that felt that if they did anything that might appear to be a concession, that they would be doing a disservice to their race.

[Redacted off-the-record comment regarding ROTC officer.]

WC: So that the frequency really did—I mean—

JF: Accelerated.

WC: —the visits were a little more frequent, they were more militant, and they were more different people.

JF: I wouldn’t say militant, in that sense of the word, but more demanding.

WC: More demanding, more assertive, yeah.

JF: Not as patient. They wanted it done boom, boom, boom.

[Redacted conversation about tape recorder.]

WC: Let’s see. What was your perception of the rest of the community? What kind of pressures did you feel the board was under? What kind of support were you getting from various groups in the community?

JF: I can answer that question—I did this purposely anticipating that question to some extent. Here is a letter written July 25, 1957, by this gentleman.

[Recording paused]

WC: That was the decision?

JF: Yes, yes. That's typical.

WC: In other words—now, this letter here is from the [Greensboro] Chamber of Commerce.

JF: That's right. Well, here's one from an individual, one from a doctor.

WC: Oh, I'm sorry.

JF: Excuse me.

WC: Would you say that the business community in general was supportive of the position that the board took?

JF: By all means, yes, yes. A number—

WC: And was united?

JF: Well, to the contrary, I would say that it wasn't outwardly and openly opposed. They accepted our decision graciously. I'll put it that way.

WC: That's very interesting.

JF: This is July 23, 1957. That was pretty well expressant of the community.

WC: Now, this is clearly—when you made this decision in 1957 to admit the—what was it? You admitted seven out of nine, didn't you—seven out of nine applicants?

JF: Yeah. Here are the applications. This is what we used. You may have seen this.

WC: I've seen the exhibit book, but I don't think I've seen the original applications.

JF: These are Photostats, of course.

WC: You had pretty much decided in advance, hadn't you, by this time, what you were going to do and how you would proceed?

JF: Yes. And there's where Dr. Hampton came in—a matter of tremendous value. Yes, we had. There was the list of the ones who, after the Pearsall Plan, went in and after these applications became what we thought were legal.

WC: I would like to have a chance to go over these.

JF: You certainly may.

WC: Perhaps not today—

JF: I'd be happy to let you have anything I have that would be of value.

WC: You're very generous. I very much appreciate that. Maybe what I should do is to [pause] well—

JF: You take them along if you care to. You can return them at your convenience.

WC: Talk at the end of—I might be come back sometime next week. I'll perhaps take these and bring them back when I come.

In terms of the business community, was this an active kind of support, or was it sort of going along with what the board had done?

JF: You got your machine off?

WC: No.

JF: Why don't you turn it off. Let me—

WC: Okay.

[Recording paused]

WC: [reading] "The school board had problems assigning pupils, especially where Negro pupils applied to be assigned to a white school." And he says "I agree with Colonel [William] Joyner's statement." Now, that's Col. Joyner who was on the Pearsall commission?

JF: Yes, yes.

WC: What exactly was Col. Joyner's position?

JF: Col. Joyner, of course, was really—he was the brains behind the Pearsall Plan, a highly respected and a very fine, brilliant lawyer. It was he really who had the idea and who came up with the plan. But it couldn't be the Joyner Plan because Joyner wasn't involved in any political aspect of that, but Pearsall—Luther Hodges and Pearsall got together with Joyner. I met with that group several times, and Col. Joyner was always the one who answered the questions and pointed out the legal possibilities. Tom Pearsall was supposed to be a lawyer, but he wouldn't [unclear] peanuts and—yeah. [laughter]

WC: Pig farmer, but a farmer, not a lawyer. It is an interesting letter. In other words, this represents a kind of support for the gradual approach of the school board, and for, as you said earlier, a kind of control of what was going to happen.

JF: That's right. I think that this one sentence right here answers your question. This is a very interesting article. I want you to read this whether you get anything out of it or not. She said, "I was grim. He had a long, hard night ahead of him, but he never lost control of the meeting." We tried to keep calm, tried to keep emotions at a minimum, especially expressed emotions.

WC: This is the meeting that night—is that [*Greensboro Record* writer] Dorothy Benjamin's piece?

JF: Yes.

WC: Yeah.

JF: That's a [unclear] piece.

WC: Yeah, I have a copy of this piece.

JF: It almost makes you want to cry when you read it.

WC: Yeah, it really does.

JF: It's a real fine article.

WC: It certainly is. Where did you feel the opposition was coming from to your position? Clearly there was opposition, but where did you sense that it was—

JF: Your rednecks and your extremists, like John Casper[?], who came through here a couple, three times. Said one night he hoped—an ambulance passed by, he hoped that was me having a heart attack. [Red] Webster—but another interesting thing that may be pertinent: I didn't get any bricks thrown through these windows. I had a German police dog about the size of a cow. Every afternoon—every morning I would take the dog and I would walk up and down the block exercising. Don't you think everybody didn't know that dog was here, and he was a one-man dog. But the cops—the chief of police put cops, a patrol car, right down by the tennis court there where they could see it. Whether that did any good or not—but, in any event, several other people did get bricks and cross-burnings and that sort of thing.

WC: Yeah. But in terms of groups that you could identify, established parts of the community, you—they were either supportive or didn't say anything. Would that be true?

JF: The main opposition was not well-coordinated. In other words, old man [Clarence Leroy] Shuping—who at one time was a neighbor of mine, a fine old fellow—I used to like to hear him talk about his politics. He and Roosevelt—he finally got crossed-up with Roosevelt, but he could have been postmaster general. He was in a potent position with Roosevelt. But he was one of the die-hard old schools. And he thought he was a constitutional lawyer, and he thought that he knew what Congress had in mind when they passed the laws and so on. And he raised hell at the meeting, vilified Ben Smith. You read the article, I'm sure. Subsequently, many times in the morning—the old man liked to walk to work—many times in the morning, going down Madison Avenue I'd see him walking. I'd stop and, many times, picked him up. We didn't hold any grudges. I'll have to say that for him, even though he was a cantankerous old bastard.

WC: [laughs] There was something that you said that got me thinking. I can't remember what it is.

[End of Recording]

JF: The newspapers, thank God, they were with us. And everybody more or less seemed to sense that Bill [Snider?]—well, they could tell from his editorials. Bob Moseley, the attorney, got a brick through one of his windows.

WC: Were these people ever caught, who would—

JF: Webster was caught, yes.

WC: I heard from one source that the city council came under a lot of pressure after the initial action of the school board in ‘54.

JF: That possibly is true. Like people like this McDowell[?] fellow. He was going to see to it we never got another seat. I kept the city council informed. I remember one Saturday morning city hall was closed, but I knew that [General James] Townsend—who was city manager at that time—was there, and I knew that several other members of the committee, not related to the school particularly, were there, so I went down there and told them exactly what we were going to do and what the timing was. That’s an extremely important thing there. The timing was important in my book. I was accused of being the one that organized the deal for the three cities to get together and make simultaneous announcements. I was blamed for that. And, as a matter of fact, I had to raise hell with Winston[-Salem], particularly. I said, “If we go out separately, they get three shots at us. If we go out collectively, they get one big shot and boom, that’s it. Would you rather have your fanny burned individually? Give them three shots?” And they came along very nicely.

WC: So you did organize it?

JF: Beg your pardon?

WC: So those who said you organized it were right?

JF: Yeah. [laughter] I didn’t know if you’d seen this editorial or not. This last paragraph, particularly, relates to what I—

WC: Yes, right.

JF: An interesting development about this time, too, this was in November of ‘57. This attorney here, Mr. Shields, J.J. Shields—you’ve probably seen his name—a half-assed lawyer. He represented a group down in south Greensboro. As a matter of fact, I’m a native of down there and grew up with the Shields family. He came from that part of town. And they got him to represent them. You run across this.

WC: Yes, this is the case of trying to enjoin the board from proceeding with the—

JF: Yes. And, among other things, he tried to make a case of us employing Welch Jordan and paying him a fee because he participated with Moseley, and this is the answer to that complaint.

WC: I see. Could I take these?

JF: Oh, sure. You can have anything you want to that would be of any value to you.

WC: I have not seen these briefs. When I was down at the school board office, Dr. Howe[?] said that they didn't have the briefs there, that they were probably in district court, but I haven't been to district court yet. I think that this can be helpful, if I may look at them and perhaps copy them.

JF: You surely may. You're welcome to anything that I have. I'm not a professional newspaper clipper, but I've kept some things.

WC: You certainly have. You have some nice things here.

JF: And one thing more in connection with this case—which finally was heard before Judge [L. Richardson] Preyer at that time, now a congressman. And I've said many times that Rich did a great favor when he sat on the bench and was heard. Rich was very patient. He tried to explain to—oh, Ben was there, and probably a half-dozen of us who were supposed to have been the—oh, what do you call them? The non-appellants. And he explained the law very calmly and graciously, and I've said many times that Rich really helped. As to how intentional it was, I don't know. I've talked to Rich a number of times since then about it, and he never said whether it was intentional or whether it was just something he did in the normal course of his easy-going, fine way. But he helped us. Well, obviously he had no case, but an antagonistic judge could have been rough.

WC: I do want to talk to him when I can, of course. There are so many people I want to talk to I'll be going around for years. Was the issue of schools, and particularly the race question, raised in the campaigns for city council?

JF: I don't recall it becoming an issue of any consequence. In fact, I don't recall it becoming an issue at all. I credit Dr. Hampton. I give him a lot of credit for that phase. He kept it out of the political picture.

WC: But the other side didn't make it an issue. In other words, those who were pro-segregation?

JF: No. Of course, anybody, if they had been pro-integration, they would not have campaigned on that basis.

WC: That's right. I guess not. Maybe you could just talk a little bit about what importance you see Ben Smith as having.

JF: What his role—

WC: Yes.

JF: Well, there, of course, you have to go back a little bit, too. I'm sure you've researched enough to know that Ben was a captain in World War I, probably around Shelby, North Carolina. He had been a school man after he got out of the army and was a school worker over in that part of the state, and is always, to that group over there, Captain Smith. He came home from the war a captain, and he stayed Capt. Smith to those people as long as he lived. When he came into this system, this system had had some problems—not integration problems, but some personnel problems at that level, which created some problems right at the outset.

I think you have to take other things into consideration. His devout Methodist religious belief—incidentally, his minister stuck behind us in this.

WC: Charlie Bowles?

JF: Yes, and it made us feel mighty good, because he expressed openly his opinions. As to Ben, I think he realized that this was inevitable, and I think that he realized and was convinced that the best thing to do was to face it, not to elude and pull legal maneuvers. Might have kept the thing going for eight, maybe ten years by constantly maneuvering legally, but he felt that that wouldn't be of any advantage. And I think that was basically true. His idea was that if you have to face a mean situation, then don't run around hoping it's going to go away, because it isn't going to go away. Let's face it. And I think that he was thoroughly convinced conscientiously. I don't think he basically liked it particularly, but you've got to face realism. Ben was criticized terribly, and he didn't—as you know, he didn't resign when he might have. Neither he nor I did when we might have. We knew that this was coming. He wasn't going to run from it, and I wasn't going to run from it.

WC: Do you think that his leadership and your leadership—without that, would the board have done the same thing with the school system?

JF: Well, now, let's leave our own criticism on what you referred to as my leadership out, because I don't know in my own mind. I know what some other people have thought. To

me, my greatest contribution, or the thing that I considered to be my greatest contribution, was organizing, I think, the three cities. To me that was the acme. True, I had some rough times and sat through some rough sessions locally, but getting that deal organized and that side of that—. *Life* magazine—this was the September opening date of school—*Life* magazine—well, gosh, it was *Life* and *Life-Time* [*Time-Life*?]—had about four or five photographers that spent about a week here in Greensboro. You may have—well, I'm sure you must have. And they came down to our place and they had me posing and walking all over the place and going through all these darn gyrations, and I—frankly, I hated like hell to do it, because in our business we worked in Georgia and Alabama and down into Tennessee, and I knew that some of my friends, you know, it might even effect some of the business. But I knew that eventually people had to come to their senses, so I went through with it. And I've said so many times that if Little Rock had to happen, thank God it happened. Because the very day—if you check *Life* magazine, you'll find that the Greensboro group had one picture, and that was of Webster. And the picture caught [him] looking just as mean as you've probably seen him. But I just wonder how many pictures of me are in *Life*'s morgue. You should have heard these boys scream. Well, as a matter of fact, there was one girl. And when they heard about Little Rock, here they had gone to all this trouble taking pictures all over the place, and then Little Rock takes the whole damn magazine, and did they raise hell. And did I like it! I loved it.

WC: I just got the impression that—well, we won't talk about this.

JF: As far as leadership is concerned, and confining it to Ben, I think I've summed up what may have contributed in one sentence. Ben—I don't know how to put it. I don't want to be disrespectful. He was sincere, he was honest, he was convinced—and this would probably need some clarification and definition—but at times a little bit clumsy, if you know what mean. In other words, he didn't have the finesse of a diplomat. Maybe that will describe. In other words, I wouldn't come out directly and lie, but I would maneuver little bit.

[Redacted conversation with person who enters the room.]

WC: You were just saying he didn't have the finesse of a diplomat. But do you have a case in point that might illustrate that, just off-hand? These groups that would come in to see Smith, in other words, some of them might have been anti-integration as well as pro-integration?

JF: That's true. Remember, he had a big system of schools. He had many problems more urgent than the PTA wanting a wastebasket on the playground. Our water coolers were one thing that we finally snuck in under a miscellaneous non-budget clause, but they

weren’t approved by the state. That type of thing. He didn’t use his imagination. In other words, he would tell the group, “Well, the state does not approve water coolers in the school.” That doesn’t make sense. There was a miscellaneous non-budget fund, so we put water coolers in every school. He believed what the book said without attempting any deviation, with due respect.

WC: Yes, this is an interesting thing. I hadn't really heard this about him before. I haven't really talked to people who have known him as well as you did. I get the impression of a very straightforward man who stood on a track and followed it.

JF: He had the old army basis. If the book said this, then that was it. There's no way to go around this way a little bit. Well defined, the lines. He was correct, but there might have been practically a question about the diplomacy involved.

WC: Now he resigned shortly after the board had—you both resigned, you resigned after he did.

JF: Yes.

WC: You both resigned by the end of '59, wasn't it, or '58?

JF: '58. I felt that I had gone through with what I had faced and—[Interrupted by Mrs. Foster]. You can answer one question he just asked me about the reaction of people to Ben Smith's tenure as superintendent.

Mrs. JF: Well, of course, in the position I was in, I probably wouldn't have heard any derogatory remarks. I think that, generally, people began to accept things, don't you?

JF: We were thinking more about Ben's public relations, let's call it.

Mrs. JF: I thought they were very good. I thought his staff supported him wonderfully, and the PTA folks, of course. That was the level that I was.

JF: I made the statement that if the book said this, Ben believed in following it, and sometimes people got a little upset because Ben would follow the strict line and maybe he could have bent it a little bit.

Mrs. JF: Well, I really had no way of knowing about that, but on the level of the average parent which I was, and in PTA work I worked on the city council some and in the local groups, I found people generally cooperative. But at that time, it was still separate but

equal, I mean, it was very little. Now I have heard, of course—I am not in it now, our children are grown—but now that they are really going to school together, there is—they know they have no alternative, that's what the law says, but the real day-to-day thing coming home to people. Like my son came home from school and he's using words he never heard before in his life, and there's nothing I can do about it. That sort of thing, you know, which is a very real thing for a young, impressionable child, and I can sympathize with them.

JF: You mean, not what could be interpreted as curse words, as much as English structure.

Mrs. JF: Yes, and obscenities just fall off of—And another thing I've heard young mothers say is "I just can't give my child any money or it's taken away from them. They steal everything." How general that is I don't know. That was just a certain group. And another thing is the fact—of course, I know that there's a certain period in there where they have to get used to the idea, and there obviously has been much disruption that we don't know anything about—but I heard a young mother say that, for instance, to be specific, the child had gotten the first report card and there was nothing by Social Studies, and she said "Why don't you have a grade by Social Studies?" And the child said, "We haven't had any." Now that was the first year that there was wholesale integration there, and there were certainly subjects that they had to let go by the board because I would imagine there were discipline problems.

JF: Of course, Ben was not superintendent.

Mrs. JF: Oh, no. There are many angles to it, the thing I describe.

JF: Of course, busing emphasizes the very thing you're talking about. He's only going to '65 in his study.

WC: It gets so complicated after that. All these HEW guidelines, in a sense it's not worth it to go through the detail.

Mrs. JF: We went California to visit John's sister and her family, and her youngest child is in elementary school still, and there's absolutely no integration and no busing there. And she said, "We really live in a white ghetto." You see, there's no forced busing in California, there's none of that. It's just neighborhood schools like we used to have.

JF: There are not enough Negros there to be a problem. Probably it would be the Mexicans there.

Mrs. JF: The Mexicans could, but they aren't there. Their daughter can walk to her elementary school, which is what our children did. She can walk to junior high and high school, and they're all her own group, so to speak.

WC: Well, when Mr. Foster was chairman of the school board, you had children in school?

Mrs. JF: Yes. Oh, yes.

JF: My boy was in school when the first little Negro girl—

WC: And you were in PTA at that point?

Mrs. JF: Oh, yes. All the way through.

WC: What did you feel was going on in terms of the attitudes of the other parents in the PTA, in terms of your experience? Did you get a lot of—

Mrs. JF: No. The group of people that I worked with—well, I had been in it a right good while and I was up at the city level. People who worked with me there were extremely broadminded and liberal, I would say. If they had any adverse feelings, they didn't express them. They were—don't you think, by and large, they were liberal? Don't you think? They saw the handwriting on the wall.

JF: Yes, with that class of people, no problem.

Mrs. JF: But, of course, there was a cross-section. There were some in there who came from moderately low economic levels, but not very many of them. Most of them were college educated women or certain people with teaching backgrounds. The men were business leaders.

JF: Of course, that level that you were talking about, this was the top of that level.

Mrs. JF: Oh, yes. But they were representatives of other groups in there. I don't think at the time I was in the PTA council there were—but there was a separate Negro council at that time, wasn't there?

WC: But didn't the North Carolina PTA oppose the Pearsall Plan?

Mrs. JF: You know, I had forgotten that. It all merges into the past, so.

WC: There were very few groups which did oppose it, and that one stands out in my memory as having been one of them. I was just wondering whether you could recall any of the issues that were involved with that decision or whether the Greensboro PTA had anything to do with that?

Mrs. JF: I can't remember. But I would say that among the state city-wide PTA groups, that Greensboro is much more liberal, much more. Wouldn't you, John?

JF: Yes. I'll tell you a story that's interesting while she's here. The group of boys, about once a month, had a little gathering and little poker and the usual things that go along with a stag gathering of old boys. And I was having a very fine time. This place was about nine miles out in the country. We had this little clubhouse. And I was enjoying myself, had a big steak and sitting around playing poker and talking. The telephone rang and it was for me. It was Mama. She said, "I think you better come home."

I said, "What's the trouble?"

She says, "Well, Mrs. Smith has just called me and said that they had burned a cross in their front yard and she wanted to let us know in case they might come to our place."

I says, "Well, I'll come home."

Fortunately I was a little ahead in the poker game. I came on home. Do you remember that night? Nothing happened.

Mrs. JF: Oh, yes. And the thing that—you see, before Mrs. Smith called me, a reporter from the *[Greensboro] Daily News* called and wanted to know if we were having any trouble out here. And I said, "No."

And he said, "Well, I understand that they're burning a cross in the Smiths' front yard."

And that's what alerted me. And I called the city police and they said that they didn't know anything about it, but I'm sure they sent someone out right away. It had just happened or was just happening.

WC: Sounds to me like someone called the *Daily News* and said that the cross was going to be burned.

Mrs. JF: But it was there. It was burned.

JF: At the Smith place.

WC: Sounds like someone coordinated public relations on the other side over there.

JF: I'll never forget that night.

Mrs. JF: The worst night was when you were out of town and someone called about 1:30[am]. I was sound asleep and the phone rang. I jumped up and I don't think I was even wide awake when I answered. You know, if you're in a deep sleep it takes you a minute or two. And they asked—it was a man's voice—and he asked if this was the residence of John Foster, and I said, "Yes." He was very ordinary, you could tell from his grammar. He said, "How many niggers have you got out there in bed with you?" And I—it stunned me. And I don't know. I wasn't awake, but I had sense enough to just hang up, and he never called again. But it really did frighten me.

[End of interview]

WC: Postscript to interview with John Foster: At the very end before I left, and the recorder was off, he started telling [me] about Luther Hodges. He said that he knew Hodges fairly well, knew his private phone number in Raleigh. Whenever he and Hodges were together, Hodges would pull him off to the side and say, "How are things going in Greensboro?"

And Foster would respond, "Okay, just keep calm. We've got things under control."

Then Hodges would say to Foster, "What do you hear from the folks down east?"

And Foster would say, "Don't worry about them."

And then Foster made an interesting comment that the "folks down east" were a bother to Hodges or a threat. But then Foster said that what we were doing for them, really, was to give them an umbrella to protect them. We were giving them an umbrella to put shelter over them. They didn't appreciate it at the time, but more and more they have come to understand what it is we were doing for them. Some of them will even say so now. An interesting comment: "We were holding an umbrella over their heads," he said. Then he went on to say that—

I talked more with him about the coordination of the timing of the Charlotte, Winston, and Greensboro policies on desegregation of schools. He said they even had it almost down to the exact minute when they would all three pass the resolutions or take action. He had marvelous cooperation from the press here. That Hugh Haynie, the *Daily News* cartoonist, already had a cartoon drawn showing a knight on a horse carrying three flags. He had two versions of it, one with two flags and one with three flags, depending on whether Winston came through. But there was an editorial cartoon praising the action and supporting it. And Foster made the comment over and over again that the press was marvelous to him and cooperated completely, and that he never was betrayed by them. He seemed to place a great deal of emphasis on not being betrayed by them.

One of the things he said was that he tried like hell to get a hold of Luther Hodges the day before the meeting and Hodges couldn't be reached. He finally called the editor of the *High Point Enterprise* and said, "Look, can't we get Luther to make an innocuous statement, not necessarily praising what we're going to do, but just 'roses are red, violets are blue, this is okay,

et cetera'? Can't we just get him to make a neutral statement which will not be critical, and will give us some kind of support, even if this support is passive?" And they finally reached Hodges in a fishing camp in the state of Washington, and Hodges refused to go along. He refused to make that kind of statement. This is one thing that had made Foster sometimes as angry as could be at Hodges, even though he likes Hodges very much and considers him a friend. That, I think, is also an interesting anecdote.

[Chafe's recorded notes on his impression of Foster and Dr. William Hampton's role in events are not transcribed]