GREENSBORO VOICES/GREENSBORO CIVIL RIGHTS ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

INTERVIEWEE: Anne Cook

INTERVIEWER: Justin Payne

DATE: 10/24/08

JP: This is Justin Payne, in the second floor faculty conference room, with Mrs. Anne Cook, on Friday, October 24, 2008. [pause] What is your date of birth?

AC: December the 29, 1938.

JP: Where were you born and raised?

AC: I was born in Greensboro at Wesley Long [Community] Hospital, but I was raised in Denton, North Carolina.

JP: What are the names of your father and mother, and where were they born?

AC: My mother is Elizabeth Thompson Bisher, and she was born in—outside of Swainsboro Georgia, and was raised in—between Statesboro, Swainsboro, and Savannah Georgia. My father is Harold Bisher, B-i-s-h-e-r. He was born in Randolph County, raised on a farm, but moved into the town of Denton when he was probably about twelve or thirteen.

JP: What level of education did your parents have?

AC: My mother went to the eleventh grade. They only had twelve grades then—only had eleven grades then, but I'm not sure she finished up that grade. I think she came to North Carolina to marry my daddy. She had met him when she was a young girl staying with her sister in Denton. And my dad went to North Carolina State [University], but he only went two years there.

JP: What sort of work did your father and mother do?

AC: My mother was a housewife. She raised six children. My dad owned a—well at first owned an oil and ice company, and I guess then refrigerators got to be the big thing, so he didn't do that anymore. And he bought a men's hosiery mill, and from there on out he made men's socks and things.

JP: Where and when did you attend high school and college?

AC: I attended high school at Denton High School, and there were thirty eight people who graduated from my class. That's how small it was. Then I attended Greensboro College, 1957 to 1961.

JP: How would you explain the social and economic climate in which you grew up?

AC: I don't know. It was a small town, very small town, and most of the people were textile workers. It was—at that time, everybody knew everybody, and the child that walked down the street was everybody's child. Nobody minded calling down anybody's children. And it was just—basically my whole life grew up around the high school, the school—the high school and the church. And Daddy made us all work at one time or another at the hosiery mill so that we'd learn how to work. And he didn't let us work in the office either; he made us start with the sweeping jobs all the way up to putting labels on socks and things.

JP: Were there any black people in the area in which you grew up?

AC: I didn't know but probably three black people. They were an older couple that lived in a little house not far from me. And she just—Blanch went around and she worked for other people, just helping out. She helped out my aunt, and she helped out other people in town that needed help, and she thought that she was the boss of the town and she could tell us all what to do. [chuckles] And her husband John and her sister Ethel grew up there. Ethel was a teenager, because she used to sometimes babysit for me.

JP: What was the general sentiment regarding black people in your community?

AC: I was never taught prejudice. I know there were prejudice people in the community, but we weren't taught prejudice. We were taught to respect everybody. And like if Blanch came over and she caught me doing something and she corrected me, Momma and Daddy never questioned her because they knew that if she was calling me down, there was a reason for it. And we were just taught respect, but there were other people that were just very, very prejudice. And I would hear tales. I would hear horrible things, but I just never saw it.

JP: Do you remember any specific instances, either positive or negative, which involved black people in your community?

AC: As far as actually something happening?

JP: Yeah.

AC: Well, I do know that one time John was out walking and some teenage boys threw some rotten apples and things and hit him. And it hurt his feelings, because he had always been respected and everybody's always looked up to him and liked him. But that probably—I

was a child, and I always heard about a hanging tree when I was growing up, and that just horrified me. And Daddy tried to tell me that it wasn't true, but I keep hearing things even now, as old as I am, about it. I don't know if it ever happened. I never saw anything like that, but I'm assuming it happened before I was ever born, because my Daddy said he never saw it.

JP: Why did you decide to go to Greensboro College?

AC: You know, I don't know. [laughs] I think at the time Daddy was—I didn't have a choice on where I wanted to go, I don't think. And I did—but I did decide I wanted to come to Greensboro because my high school teacher graduated from Greensboro College, and she talked it up to me. But my daddy was the type of person that he just decided where his children would go to school and basically what they would do. And he picked out Greensboro because it was an all girls school at that time. And he figured that was a good place for me to be, where there were no boys. [chuckles]

JP: What was your major in, and why did that subject appeal to you?

AC: Education, and it appealed to me because that's all I ever wanted to be was a teacher. I had five younger brothers and sisters and I made them sit, and I had a blackboard and I made them go to school every day. And I just wanted to be a school teacher.

JP: How would you describe the situation between black and whites in Greensboro during the time you began attending college?

AC: I was beginning to hear things, you know? [sigh] The fact that there was unrest and all. And [sigh] I don't know, let me put this in. When I was a little girl and I used to go to the county fair—there was a county fair; we'd have school day. And when I'd be riding rides and all I'd look out and see little black children with their face up against the fence looking in, wanting to go so bad. And the injustices of the world were just something that I—I guess I just couldn't understand as a child. And even the people I knew here in Greensboro, the black people, were—my aunt had a lady who worked for her. And everybody I ever knew was just nice and good to me and everything else. But I guess the unrest was starting then, because what I didn't understand either was—and we didn't have this at home—there would be a—what they called a colored water fountain or there would be colored bathrooms. Or when we'd get with the Carolina Theater, they would stand in line and go up to the third floor balcony, where as everybody else got to sit on the bottom floor or the middle balcony. And I just, I thought things like that were just not right, they weren't fair.

JP: Prior to 1960, were people on campus well informed about the civil rights? And did they know about the ongoing struggle for desegregation and fair treatment going on in Greensboro?

AC: I don't know. I don't think that that—you know, I guess that most girls where sheltered back then and I guess that we didn't really know, until it all started up then we started hearing things. But I don't believe than any of us really knew what was going on.

JP: Do you remember any specific instances, either positive or negative, which involved blacks in the Greensboro area or on the college campus?

AC: Not on this college campus I don't. But I do know that one day I went downtown by myself, that's when downtown Greensboro had Belk's and Tollhowers[?] and all the stores and everything. And I was coming back, and the bus stopped, and there was a little old lady who was probably about—to me she was old, oldster. And she probably wasn't any older than I am, but she had both arms full of groceries. And when she got on the bus, I got up, the way I was raised, and I said, "Here, take my seat," because I was sitting on the front seat. And the bus driver told me that she couldn't sit there.

And I said, "Why not?"

And he said, "Because she's black, she has to go to the back."

And I said, "Well that's the stupidest thing I've ever heard of." I said, "I'm going to the back, she can sit here."

And he said, "You can't go to the back, you're not black."

And I said, "Well I'm going."

And he wouldn't start the bus and I went back to the back anyways and sat down. And she was standing there upset, and finally everybody on the bus said, "Let her sit, let her sit. Let's just go." So he finally let her sit down, but he was upset. I was mad as fire, because to me, if she couldn't sit down, then I wasn't going to sit down. And there was no place for her to sit on the back, which is why I stood up and she sat in my seat. And I thought that was unfair.

JP: Were there many black people on campus during the time that you attended school?

AC: I don't think there was any black people on this campus at all.

JP: Any workers or anything like that?

AC: You know, I honestly do not remember if there were any black workers. I think there may have been some ladies in the cafeteria, because we had family dining then all the time. You had to go in and sit down, and you meals were served. And a lot of girls were working their way through school serving the meals, but I think that the cooks were—a lot of them—maybe some of them were black.

JP: How would you describe the general sentiment on Greensboro College campus regarding blacks from the student's perspective?

AC: I think that everybody was sympathetic, but yet, like I said, I guess they were just sheltered, raised, and did not know there were so many injustices. Or if they knew them, they didn't, you know, speak out or they got—I do know that we—every now and then we would have things that we did with Bennett College. Bennett was the Methodist girl's school. We were a Methodist girl's school. And I do know that one time we went Christmas caroling together at different places. And we had carols here on campus. And they had—we served cookies and punch and things and had a social with the Bennett girls. And there were some absolutely gorgeous girls, nice, well mannered. And then we had a spring picnic at Greensboro City Lake that we'd all get on buses and go. I guess the schools made the sandwiches and things, and we had a picnic and we were supposed to mingle and socialize, which we did. And that was back the first time I ever really had any, you know, associations black girls I think. And I do know that we weren't—we could go to Hams—you know where Hams is?

JP: [Nods]

AC: We could go to Hams, but definitely weren't supposed to drink beer or anything. And the guys knew it who worked there, every one of them were graduates from [North Carolina] A&T [State University] and they worked at Hams. And they'd come out to the car, and they would bring a couple of the girls that were with me beer in a milkshake cup so that it wouldn't look like they were drinking beer. And every one of them, we would talk to them. They'd sit in the car and talk to us and everything if they got a break. Because we wanted to know what was going on, and we did ask this. We'd ask them, you know, "Okay, you graduated from A&T. Why are you working at Hams?"

And they said, "Because we're black and we can't get jobs in our field because we're black."

And they were all just as friendly and as nice as could be, but I just thought that was—was unusual too. Why did you go to school and you got an education but you couldn't get a job because you were black? And they would tell us that, you know, because those were things that—that worried me, and I know they worried my roommates too. But I—I can't speak for them as far as, you know, whether they did anything or not.

JP: Do you think that the faculty or the administration shared the student's concern about the civil rights?

AC: I don't know because it's just like—well I know that they supported us on the having the picnic, the spring picnic, and they also supported the—had to have supported us having

the Bennett girls over here for the Christmas party. So I don't know whether it was the—we only had two societies then: the Irving and the Emerson society. There was no Phi Beta Kappa, nothing like that, no Lambda Kai [Alpha]'s, nothing with the boys or girls. That way we just had the two societies. But you know, they didn't tell us we couldn't do it. There was nobody that said, "You can't have the Bennett girls over here. You can't entertain them." I suppose there was somebody behind it to tell us what we could do.

JP: When—when you did begin taking an interest in civil rights, what prompted that interest?

AC: I guess, all along all the injustices from the time I was a child. I guess that when I was a little girl, my daddy brought me *The Diary of Anne Frank*. I hadn't even heard of it or anything. He brought it in to me and he said, "Here, I want you to read this." And I read the whole book, and that just tore me apart. And then later I saw the movie. And I know Greensboro College several years ago had *The Diary of Anne Frank* exhibit here. It was a big exhibit, all the photos her daddy had taken and everything. That I guess was one of my first things with people being treated wrong for what they were. And then I started worrying about, you know, the black community.

And then, when I was in high school, my mother had—there were six of us, and my mother had a girl who wanted a job, and she was sixteen. I had my license, she lived in another county, but on Monday mornings I would go get her. She was black. Her name was Geneva. And her older sister had worked for Momma when the babies were little. She came in to work for Momma. Geneva wanted a job. And I was amazed that Geneva had three children and she was sixteen, and I didn't even hardly know where children came from at that point. But she left them with her mother and she would come live with us from Monday till Friday, then on Friday afternoon when I was to take her back. Geneva and I—when Momma worked us, she didn't work, you know. Geneva wasn't like she was a servant who had to work. She was paid; she had a room upstairs that she slept in while she was there. And when Momma worked one of us, she worked us all. When it was time to mop floors, wash windows, we were all working. And one day we had worked hard, washing windows and mopping and waxing floors, and Momma said, "Girls, I'm gonna give you some money to go downtown. Y'all have worked hard today." And she gave us both money that was other than Geneva's pay.

And Geneva said, "I can't go downtown, Anne."

And I said, "Yes, you can too."

She said, "No."

And I said, "Well we're going to go ride around, go over to the lake, and we're going to go get us some cheeseburgers and french-fries."

And she was scared to death. And we went downtown to the little café—it's still there—park in, and one of my friends was working there. And she begged, she said, "I'm not going in." Well, I had enough sense not to force her to do that, because I didn't understand why she couldn't go in, but I knew that probably it was not a good idea for her to go in. So I blew the horn and my friend came out, and I ordered two cheeseburgers, two orders of french-fries, and two milkshakes. And he said, "I can't server her."

And I said, "Why not?"

He said, "Because she's black and you're gonna get me in trouble."

I said, "I think that's the dumbest thing I've ever heard of." And I can still remember that conversation, and he does too. I said, "I tell you what you do. I'm hungry. You go in there and you get me two cheeseburgers, two french-fries and two milkshakes and you bring them out here."

And Geneva kept saying, "Let's go, let's go, let's go."

And I said, "No, I'm getting my cheeseburger, my french-fries, and my milkshake."

And he brought them out and he said, "You're gonna get me into a lot of trouble."

And I said, "You should tell them to call my daddy if they get you in trouble. Tell them you got it for me because I pitched a fit and it was mine and I wanted it."

I never did hear anything out of it. And we did go over to the lake and we sat there and ate those cheeseburgers and our french-fries and our stuff. But it just irritates—it does—to think that.

And there was a Hounds[?] truck driver who used to come to my daddy's mill. And my husband could never understand this: He would never come in the front door. He would go around to the back and they would bring him out his food. But that's the injustice of it: They could not eat in a restaurant.

JP: In what way did you participate in the Greensboro civil rights movement?

AC: Well, they came in here—somebody came in here and asked us if we would support the Bennett girls. They were wanting us to sit down at the—to just take a stool down at the Woolworth's building. And I don't even know who all was at that meeting. There was a handful of people there. And my roommate and I decided that we'd go up there and fill it out—to sit, and we did. We walked up town and we sat in. We got a stool and we ordered a pine float. And I think that she was doing it because she thought it was fun just to be a little bit rebellious, but then I finally realized what I was doing. I was holding space so that nobody could just sit there and order. The counters were full of students, but nobody

was, you know, nobody was eating anything. They were studying, they had their books, and they ordered water with a toothpick. It was called a pine float, that's what we ordered. And I would go. Every day I would leave the library to go down there, because I had a planning—all afternoon free, and I'd take my books and I'd go up there and I'd sit and I'd study. But I don't know if anyone else ever went with me anymore after that first time or not. I just know I was there. And I told my daddy so he would know. And he said, "Do what you have to do." I mean, like I said, I wasn't raised to be prejudiced, and my daddy—

You know, we had a cross burned in our yard, and I don't know why. Ku Klux Klan burned a cross in our yard. Whether it was because the girls who worked for us got paid and they lived with us, whether that's why they burned a cross in our yard. But I heard the explosion and it woke me up, and it scared my baby sister to death. It just terrified [a lot?]. My baby sister was about two years old, and we looked outside and just the whole front yard was in flames. Because they soaked it, the cross, in gasoline, and then they had rags tied around it and they tied it down to the street, and then they lit it from the street and it exploded when it went up. And when we—when we looked out the front window there was probably about a hundred Ku Klux Klanners standing out in the road. And that was right in the middle of town, our house was. And I know they burned one in my aunt's yard, and they burned one in the mayor's yard. And I don't know why—never did know why.

JP: The day you were at the—or the first day that you went to the Woolworth, do you remember which day that was, like the date?

AC: No. I don't remember what date it was. I just remember walking uptown and going in and seeing a bunch of people sitting around, all black kids and white kids sitting at the counter, and I went in and sat. And I think what they really kind of wanted us to do was stagger it so that one person was—that, you know, a group of people weren't doing it all at one time. But I don't even remember—I know they say that Jessie Jackson was there. I don't remember any names of any people. I don't remember anybody standing out except one girl.

And she and I, one day, for some reason or another, we were not sitting. We were outside the front of Woolworth's marching and carrying signs. I don't even know where the sign came from. I think somebody just gave it to me. And we were marching with the signs. We weren't saying anything. And somebody jerked me back and her too. And it was my aunt's lady that helped her, Mabel. And she said, "Anne, what are you doing?" She said, "You are up here causing trouble."

I said, "No, I'm not."

She said, “I’m gonna tell Miss Sara and Mr. Ed, and I’m gonna tell your momma and daddy.”

I said, “Momma and Daddy know I’m up here, doesn’t make any difference.”

And then she jumped on the girl, the little black girl, and it’s her granddaughter. She was in college somewhere. And I don’t even know her name. But she said, “When you get home, you’re gonna be in trouble.” And she was fussing at her. But that’s the only person I’ve ever—but you know I don’t remember Mabel’s—my cousin might remember her name, but I don’t remember the granddaughter’s name.

JP: While you were there, do you remember any members of Greensboro College who were there with you?

AC: The first day, my roommate is all.

JP: Do you remember her name?

AC: Yeah, but I don’t know if I should give it or not. [laughter]

JP: Okay, fair enough.

AC: I’m just afraid to give it because, you know, if she wants to give it I’ll let her do it. Maybe she’ll come forward, but she won’t even come back to the school for reunions and things, so I don’t know. But she and I were the two that walked up town that did the first day. And I don’t know if she went back again. I don’t know if anybody else in our group went. I can’t even remember who was at that meeting. I just know that I did it. I guess it stood out to me because I was actually doing something to change history.

JP: This meeting, where was that at?

AC: It was in a room somewhere here in the—on the campus. I was thinking it was in this building here, but I don’t remember what room. I just know there was a piano in the room.

JP: Was it organized by a certain person or—?

AC: That’s what I don’t know. I cannot—that’s what I told, you know, the guy downstairs [Lindsay Lambert, director of the Brock Historical Museum] awhile ago. I said, “You know, I’ve racked my brain trying to think whether it was somebody came to our room, whether it was a group, a Christian group, or whether it was one of the—.” There were different groups of things, of people that, you know, wanted to do things for other people. Just like I don’t know who got the Christmas parties up, I don’t know who got the picnics up. But I keep thinking it had to be like a Christian group or something, one of the youth Christian groups.

JP: How long did you normally go down there for?

AC: I went down there—I'd go down there and maybe stay maybe an hour or two and just sit and, you know, doing my studying. But I was also interested, fascinated, watching everybody, watching people. And the waitresses worked, but they weren't allowed to serve anybody any food at all. They weren't serving food, because they weren't allowed to serve any of us any food because we were, I guess, causing everybody trouble. And they weren't allowed to serve any of the black students food at all. So nobody was getting food. And people behind us were razzing us, and just some of them cursing us and everything because we were causing trouble and they couldn't get food because they wanted it. I know that the girls told us, they said, "We walk all the way from A&T to Woolworth's to get our school supplies, just like you walk all the way from Greensboro College to get your supplies. And you can sit down and you can eat, and we can't. And we don't think it's fair." And of course that little red light goes up on me, no, that's not fair.

JP: About the people giving the protesters problems: Were you ever the target of any individual animosities from people?

AC: No, the one time when Mabel jerked me back. [chuckling] She was pretty rough. She was mad at us. But other people just, you know, nobody really did anything except maybe cat called us or said words or maybe things to us. But as far as violence, I didn't see any violence. Most people just kind of stood back and watched, maybe said things to us, but nobody ever started fights or anything that I saw.

JP: Were there any repercussions here on campus?

AC: I didn't hear anybody say anything. And I don't even know if people knew I was sitting down there or not. It's like I—the girls I was with before didn't realize I sat in. They said they had been asked by different people, and they don't even remember anybody asking us to sit down. That's what I can't understand, how I got to that meeting that—where everyone else was. I don't know whether somebody's parents maybe told them not to go to them. I don't know.

JP: When you came back to campus, did your friends or family react negatively to this?

AC: No, my family told me to do what I had to do. And like I said, we were never taught prejudice at home. My daddy just told us, "You do what you think you have to do." And as far as my friends, my roommates knew it, and—well, there was like several of us who ran around together all the time, and they were—we were suite mates, and one of them had another set of rooms. But my actual roommates: The one that went with me, but none of the rest of them did.

JP: Were you in the press at all for this?

AC: No, I don't think so, not unless somebody took—if somebody a picture I don't know it. They could have, but I never saw it.

JP: Were there any kind of negative repercussion at all, throughout any time in your life, for this, for your protesting?

AC: No. For a long time I didn't tell people that I did it. But then when I started teaching high school I was telling one of my friends I taught with, and he used it for his history lesson for years. And one of the younger teachers is still using it, talking about me sitting-in, talking about the sit-ins in Greensboro. But like I said, it was really peaceful I thought. Greensboro probably led the way, and Greensboro was very peaceful. The police stood around, but they didn't really have to, you know, knock anybody around or do anything. They just kind of kept it quiet and peaceful. I think maybe they thought it might go away, but it didn't.

JP: Do you think your involvement in this movement had an impact on Greensboro College at all?

AC: It probably didn't. Like I said, I don't know. [pause] I didn't ever tell anybody, the faculty or anybody, that I was going up there and sitting in, because I didn't know whether I could get in trouble doing it or not. But I still felt strongly enough about it to do it. Like I said, my roommates knew it, and my suitemates knew it, but I don't know if anybody else did or not. I didn't realize until you all told me a while ago that three guys had been in. I don't even ever remember seeing them there. I'm sure that they were.

JP: They were in the newspaper for the first day they were there. They had been—a newspaper interviewer or a reporter reported that those three had been there. But overall, do you think that the sit-ins at Woolworth's—Being so close to the college [Greensboro College], how did that impact the sentiment regarding civil rights on campus during that whole time period in early February?

AC: Do you want to know what I honestly think?

JP: Yes ma'am I do.

AC: I think that most of these girls were girls from middle income homes and they were very sheltered girls. I think that they were all good girls, and they were good Christian girls, and I think that want to help people, but I don't think that any of them ever really realized the injustices that were done. I just don't think that they did. And maybe that's why they weren't a whole bunch more sitting in up there. But I'm sure every one of them would do anything they could to help, because none of them that I was ever around were prejudiced. Like I said, I think they would do anything they could to help other people

out. They were good girls, all of them. In that day and time, girls were what I would call now, innocent. And I can say that because I taught high school. I taught middle school and high school, and I've watched the changes over the years. Girls aren't innocent anymore. [chuckling] But they were then. Basically all the girls I went to school with were good girls. And I'm sure they would do anything they could to help anybody. But I just don't know how many of them ever sat in up there. I didn't go up to just look to see if anybody else was sitting, so I didn't notice.

JP: Well, is there anything else you would like to add about the Greensboro civil rights movement, or about the college's involvement in it?

AC: I was proud to do it. And I'm proud of Greensboro for being one of main places for the civil rights movement to have started. Like I said, at that point, those kids had a hard time. They got their education, but it was more or less self satisfaction. But like they said, as far as getting to use it, they couldn't use it because they were black, and people weren't hiring black. The rare people that did hire black still couldn't cover the number of kids that were getting their education. And I was right up here, I decided to ride through UNCG [University of North Carolina Greensboro] trying to come to the back parking lot. And I was just looking at all the black students, and I look at the black students here. And you wouldn't have seen that, not in 1961—1960, '61. You wouldn't have seen it.

There were no blacks in my town at all. There are now. I just noticed in the paper yesterday that the junior class vice president is a black girl. I didn't even realize there were black families in our district. But there are black families that live in our school district now. And you wouldn't have seen them fifty years ago. You wouldn't have seen any black in Denton at all. In fact, I know the Ku Klux Klan came down the first time that we got two black students. Both those boys now live in Greensboro. But that was in—[pause] Let's try to think. My daughter graduated in '91. I'm thinking that was about '90 or '91, because she and one of the boys went to yearbook camp together and his momma and daddy took my daughter. And there were—they were the first two black students ever to go to our school. And the Ku Klux Klan came down, and they held a rally downtown and they tried everything that they could to get the family to move. And my school kids went down there, and it wasn't nice, but I was so proud of them. My school kids, high school kids, went down to the rally, and they walked straight up to them and just told them off. They blessed them out, jerked their hoods off of them, exposed them, took pictures of them, told them to get out of town and not ever come back or they'd make them sorry. And that was high school kids standing up for what they believed in. I was proud of them because there wasn't anybody that was going to hurt those two boys. Everybody liked them. And I couldn't have asked for better parents. Those parents backed me up all the way. But up to that point you never saw a black in my hometown.

So there are—you know I know people are changing, and I hope it's for the better. I hope everything is for the better. We have Hispanics, we have black, we have everything. And I know there is still old people that are still prejudiced. I'm hoping the younger ones aren't. Like I said, I don't know. All I can tell you is I sat in at Woolworth's, and I'm glad I did. And I enjoyed it.

[End of Interview]