**GREENSBORO VOICES/GREENSBORO PUBLIC LIBRARY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT**

INTERVIEWEE: Howard Holderness

INTERVIEWER: Eugene E. Pfaff

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EUGENE PFAFF: --Oral History program. I am speaking with Mr. Howard Holderness in the boardroom of the [Greensboro] Public Library on August 13, 1982. Mr. Holderness--

HOWARD HOLDERNESS: You may call me "Chick." I'll explain why [unclear].

EP: All right [laughs], Chick. If I may, did your involvement with the racial crisis or situation in Greensboro begin with your appointment on Mr. [Bland] Worley's committee [Human Relations Commission], or had it preceded that?

HH: Well, I might go a little backwards in answering your question there, Gene. I came from Tarboro, which probably--Edgecombe County--probably was 60 percent black and 40 percent white. When I was coming along, we used to have a baseball team that we had four black and five of us, five white on the team, and one was the--well, the shortstop was black and I was catcher. There was a catcher on the St. Louis team who was nicknamed "Chick" at that time, and Charlie Bullock, the black shortstop, started to call me Chick, and that's the way--that name has stuck with me since then.

And my relationship over the years, I've always felt on a racial problem, regardless of--long before integration, I think anybody's entitled to the dignity of the individual and have always gotten along with black, blacks in a very friendly basis, and have always felt that they had every right to the dignity that any white had.

Now, in answer to your question about when did it start, probably mine started when I was on the [Greensboro] school board, because we had--I was on the school board for a long time before the integration question came up and Worley's racial committee was set up. And of course, we had a lot of problems on the school board, particularly when the ruling [*Brown v. Board of Education*] came out on integration in--when was it? Fifty-one?

EP: Fifty-four.

HH: Fifty-four. That shows you, I told you my memory wasn't the best on dates. In '54. And when that came out, as I recall it, the decision came out where they were going to integrate, but they said they were going to implement the rules. They did not give you the rules at the time the decision came out. And I felt that it was both to the advantage of the black and the white, before we took aggressive action as a school board, that we should get the rulings, because I felt that if we were too liberal it would alienate a lot of the

whites. And if we were too--anything we did, if it wasn't liberal, would, the blacks would resent. So I was the lone dissenter in voting to say that we ought to wait, thinking that it would benefit both races to get the way they were going to tell us to operate, rather than for us to try to go ahead in that connection.

EP: This was the meeting on the May seventeenth [1954] where the resolution was--

HH: --passed that we would do that. And then, and so I said--I was written up as a lone dissenter. It wasn't a question of wanting to follow up what we were going to do, but I thought it was premature and it would be harmful to both, the black and the white, until we got the rules under which we were operating. And I voted against it, and they put me in the *New York Times* as a lone dissenter. Well, it wasn't a dissenting against the integration, but it was in the procedure. And the board subsequent to that rescinded that information, because the pressure from both sides, one, that we weren't doing enough, and the other got to be such that it became quite controversial. And they then did wait until the, until the rules were sent out and we started off doing everything that the law required. At the time I said I intended fully to vote for everything that was required under the integration setup.

EP: Have you read Dr. William Chafe's book, *Civilities and Civil Rights*?

HH: Gene, I'm ashamed to say I have not, I haven't.

EP: What this is is a thirty-year history of race relations in Greensboro from 1945 to 1975. Basically, what he says is that the board was sincere in its desire to implement, and work with, and carry out the law of the land--

HH: That is correct.

EP: --as defined by the Supreme Court--

HH: That is right.

EP: --but that there were subsequent delays, such that it was not until three years later that there was even token integration. How would you characterize--

HH: Well, I didn't remember that. I thought that we moved a lot faster than that. Now, it's my memory. Now, he's probably done the research on it, but I thought we moved as quickly as the law indicated we should move. I didn't know it was any undue delay, because we had a board, as I say, that wanted to--we had both black and white representation on it, and the intent of the board was, without exception, to move as fast as the law suggested we did.

EP: Dr. Chafe's reason for characterizing it thus is the Pearsall Plan, which has been, of course, debated back and forth as to whether it was designed to delay or to save the individual school systems. Now, I'm not advocating one way or another Dr. Chafe's

point of view, but I just present this as recent writing on the subject, and I'd like your opinion.

HH: Well, now in my opinion, now, as I told you in the beginning, being nearly eighty years old, my memory [laughs] can miss some of these, Gene. But my recollection was, now, that we were trying to do everything. Now, if Pearsall's--now, I'll put it this way. If the board felt that Pearsall's law that was passed was legal, and that's the way we should go, then we may have been guilty of delaying it, in trying to conform with the law as we in[terpreted]--as the board interpreted both the Supreme Court and the Pearsall law. I don't remember, I promise you, I don't remember any delays of that character that were unusual.

EP: So what you're saying is that the Pearsall Plan may have been to delay, but since it was the law, you had to obey it?

HH: That's right, it may have been. If it was to delay, and it was interpreted as the law, then we may have delayed it some. But I was--my recollection was we were moving. The intent of the board was to move the integration in connection with the federal law, as well as tying in with the board.

EP: Did you come under a great deal of pressure personally--

HH: No, I didn't.

EP: --by members of the community?

HH: No, but the first time, when they passed that thing to just go ahead, as I understand, Ed Hudgins, the chairman, had to take his horn off--phone off of the hook. But I mean--and they said, well, now we'd better wait until we see what it was, what the law was to be, and what the Supreme Court was to say.

EP: Did you speak with Superintendent [Ben L.] Smith at this time or during this period?

HH: Oh, we had meetings constantly, and everybody was talking. [laughs]

EP: What was his point of view or attitude?

HH: Oh, Smith was very liberal and he would have gone--he would have interpreted it--now this, maybe I'm doing him an injustice, but I think Ben would have interpreted the law just as the most liberal way you could without getting the Supreme Court or Pearsall or anybody else to tell Ben. Ben was extremely liberal.

EP: Does that mean that there was some conflict between the superintendent and the board?

HH: There was a difference of opinion, I wouldn't say "conflict." But definitely there was a difference of opinion among the board members as to the procedure you should take, not

as to the final results.

EP: Were you still a member of the school board when black students actually attended Gillespie [Junior High School] and Greensboro Senior [now Grimsley] High School in 1957? I understand there was quite a controversial--

HH: No, I was off by then, I think. Now again, I ought to check my records before I talk to you, you know, on timing, but I'm sure I was off by '57.

EP: I understand that there was quite a controversial and heated meeting of the school board that was attended by the public, in which it was finally decided that--

HH: No, I wasn't there at that time.

EP: I understand that Mr. Worley's committee was actually a subcommittee of the Community Improvement Committee.

HH: That's correct. That's correct.

EP: Did the Community Improvement Committee--what was its general purpose?

HH: It was to improve the racial relationship between the black and the white in Greensboro and the community.

EP: I see. And I understand that it had to be set up in order to receive--to qualify for certain federal funds, is that correct?

HH: Gene, you've got me there. I'm not sure of that. I'm not going to--

EP: How were you invited to become a member of Mr. Worley's committee?

HH: I've often wondered myself. [laughs]

EP: Well, obviously it had something to do with your position at Jefferson Standard.

HH: Well, I think that's probably, my position with the Jefferson, and probably the setup that we had handled as a school board, I think a combination of the two may have, may have been--I don't remember, I guess, I believe the mayor appointed me at the time.

EP: Well, that was part of my question. Were you appointed by the mayor, or were you asked to become a member by Mr. Worley?

HH: I think that, I think--I'm sure that Bland, as chairman of the committee, the mayor checked with him and that Bland was the one that said that Chick is okay and would like to have me on the committee. And the mayor approved it, my guess is. I believe it was the mayor who appointed me.

EP: As I read the newspapers of the time, the Worley committee sought to try to meet with various members of the business community, particularly the establishments that had been targeted for demonstrations or picketing.

HH: That's correct.

EP: What was the--when you discussed among yourselves, what were the guidelines or the goals that you set for the committee?

HH: Well, what the--now, I'll have to go again on memory. The highlights of this, in my opinion, were all members of the committee, when it came to the question of integrating the cafeterias or the eating places, there was quite a difference of opinion among the committee at that time as to how that should he handled. Some members of the committee felt that that ought to be a gradual process, and I was one of those. And the differentiation I made on that, I felt that those--you take, would have to go back to the, put yourself in the times existing during that committee.

When Boyd Morris, I believe it was the Mayfair Cafeteria, was operating, all his clients were white. And they, at that time--now in existing times it looks ridiculous, but at that time a lot of them did not want to have it integrated. And so some of the members of the committee felt that if it meant that Boyd would go, the Mayfair would go busted if he would integrate--and the various customers were all white--they felt that they ought to wait and be slow on that one.

But then the others, including myself, I felt strongly that--I'll use the one where they had all of the controversy, was at Woolworth's. See, Boyd was not selling anything, at that time, to the blacks. And his livelihood, he felt, depended upon him staying integrated [sic]. At Woolworth's, though, they were selling everything to the blacks that they could, but they wouldn't let them sit at the counters. Well, I felt strongly that that was an entirely different from the setup as far as speed is concerned, and so--and several members of the committee felt the same way that I did in that connection.

And we talked with the manager of the Woolworth at that time. Now, here's something that I don't know whether it's generally known, because this is, this is something that I'm very positive of and I wish I could remember all the names. But when they were having the trouble at Woolworth, I, as an individual member of the committee, went to New York [City] to see Mr. [Robert C.] Kirkland, who was head of Woolworth's. And I said, "Mr. Kirkland, I'm down from Greensboro," and gave my name, "and you've got real problems down there." And I said, "Y'all ought to let the Negroes eat at those counters. You sell them everything you can, but then when they come down to eat, they're entitled to eat there, to get that food service, too."

He said, "Mr. Holderness," he said, "that's a local matter to me." I said, "Mr. Kirkland, now don't kid me. As important as this is to you, you'd better get somebody down there other than your manager." The local manager was dead against, at the time, of integration. And I said, "You'd better get somebody down there."

And he said, then he said, "Mr. Holderness, what do you do?" He didn't know who I was. I said, "Well, I'm head of the Jefferson-Pilot, which is one of the largest insurance companies in North Carolina, and I've been on the public relations of, the head

of the public relations of the life insurance industry. And I know what this is going to mean to you, not just in Greensboro, but everywhere. You're in trouble."

And he just--he said, "Let me--." He called the public relations man in there, and he said, "Call the manager." And this is not known generally. He called the manager that was in charge of this territory from Atlanta and said, "You meet Mr. Holderness and members of this committee in his home." And we had a meeting in our home.

Now I think that the demonstrations were very--I'm not saying we did it, but the demonstrations were so important in getting them to realize what they did. But this was really the key that stopped the manager from blocking it. And then after, maybe--I was trying to think of a time while they were, just before the final demonstrations and whatnot. But I think that was very helpful and that is not generally known on that deal.

EP: At the time of Woolworth's sit-ins in 1960, you were a member of the committee [Advisory Committee of Human Relations] under Mr. [Edward R.] Zane, is that correct?

HH: That is correct.

EP: Of which Mr. Zane was elected chairman.

HH: That's right.

EP: What--you've already mentioned that you--

HH: I did that as an individual member of the committee.

EP: As a committee, what sort of activities did you do with the sit-ins in 1960?

HH: Well, we tried our best to get the, to get those--we tried, just like at Woolworth, and we tried to create a situation where it would move over into the others, like the Tea Room in Meyer's [Department Store]. And once went in the Woolworth's to try to get down to test to see whether they would--could go ahead and start the integration of others in that. And the committee was working to get complete integration in eating facilities.

EP: I noticed the newspaper indicates that frequently you met in the employees' lounge of the Woolworth and Company store here in Greensboro.

HH: Well, I didn't. I mean, if they did, that was after my day, or they didn't invite me to.

EP: Where did the committee meet? Or was it at various places?

HH: No, the committee usually met, as I remember, in City Hall, the [unclear].

EP: The Municipal Annex Building?

HH: As I remember. Now, as I said, I'm not a definite--I don't remember exactly the timing on some of these things I'm telling you, but that is--which I think is very interesting and

probably has not been mentioned in many of the write-ups I've seen published [coughs] of this crowd. [unclear].

EP: Well, Mr. Morris told me in an interview, and it was also in the newspaper at the time, that apparently one procedure of the committee was to invite the different businessmen to appear before the committee and state whether or not they would desegregate or under what conditions they would desegregate.

Apparently, Mr. Morris came before the committee and, I don't mean to say belligerently, but at least he said he was very demonstrative in saying that, "Well, if you will desegregate your businesses, I will desegregate the Mayfair tomorrow." And he said that he would not. He was a private businessman and he would not desegregate.

HH: You know, I said earlier that he felt that he would go broke and that was why the committee and I felt we ought to be slower with that than we had with those that were not affected as adversely financially as Boyd, as he would be.

EP: In terms of procedure, I suppose what I'm asking is, did the committee sit as a whole and hear what--

HH: Yeah. That's correct.

EP: --or did they go individually to each businesses?

HH: No. Well, I'm sure the various members of the committee talked to various businesses but they sat as a whole. Now since you mentioned it, I think I remember Boyd appearing in person before the entire committee.

EP: Was he rather unique in this way, or did most of the people say that "We simply cannot desegregate," or did they put forth--

HH: No, most of them--I'd say Boyd was, more or less, the speaker of that element like that rather than others individually, and I think in his talking he referred to various others which--I don't remember who--were in the same position.

EP: Another major point that the Worley committee was able to put into effect was after the demonstrations, before the S&W [Cafeteria] in October and November of 1962, the committee asked CORE, principally--the Congress of Racial Equality--and the Greensboro Citizens Association, I gather, and the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] to suspend demonstrations while they compiled a report. And this report was released in December 22, 1962. And the gist of it was that they supported the concept of equal service to all, or at least non-discrimination in services in places of public accommodation, but that they had no means to try to require this. And that, on the other hand, they said demonstrations must cease, or should cease, because there was always the threat of violence and things getting out of hand. Do you recall this report?

HH: No, but I recall that kind of a sentiment among the committee, but I don't recall the report.

EP: So you do not remember any of the circumstances by which the committee got the agreement?

HH: Well, I remember that kind of a discussion, but I don't recall it getting to the formalized report like you said, but I'm sure it did.

EP: I don't see very much more in the paper about the Worley committee before the outbreak of the major mass demonstrations in May of 1963, at which time apparently there was a committee appointed under Dr. George Evans, which was more or less an ad hoc emergency committee, and then, finally, the Human Relations Commission under W.O. Conrad, which was eventually made a permanent board or commission of the city. Do you recall how this committee faded out of existence?

HH: [laughs] No, I don't Gene. I think everybody there at the time, the committee had sincerely, as I say, tried. And I'll just end up by saying this: I think tried. And they were trying to do it effectively with a minimum of disturbance. And they were trying to do it on a basis of telling--I mean of selling, not telling white or blacks exactly what. But they did when it came to a final decision and they, whites would not--those that would not cooperate, they would not hesitate to tell them that they should and should obey the law.

But they would try--you have to go back to the times existing at the time, and a lot of this thing, it was a tinderbox, as you know. And a lot of it, if it could be done in a selling manner to both white and black, it would, I think it did. We had violence to a certain degree, but it minimized it, I think, in that kind of procedure. And there was, of course, a great deal of difference of opinion, both among both white and black, as some being militant and wanting to handle it one way and otherwise. And I was one that was hoping it could be handled in the most peaceful manner it could, but not, not--but still taking the position exactly that the law could be enforced, not begging that question at all.

EP: Well, one question that was ambivalent here, in which I wonder if the committee ever addressed itself to. Mr. Morris said, "Well, the law of the land was separate but equal, segregation in eating places, public accommodations." Other people I've talked to said, "Well, no, now that was not on the books any longer," and that it more or less was up to the individual entrepreneur or business establishment operator. Did the committee ever address itself to that and clarify that point?

HH: Well, honestly, the committee felt that it was applicable, I mean that integration was the law. We were operating on that basis.

EP: Now, if I may clarify this, that segregation was the law?

HH: No, that integration was the law. That was my understanding operating on the committee. It was just a question of the procedure that we were following to try to implement

integration. That was my understanding. Gene, thank you.

EP: Thank you, Mr. Holderness.

[End of Interview]