

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

INTERVIEWEE: Clyde E. Marsh

INTERVIEWER: Eugene Pfaff

DATE: April 13, 1979

EUGENE PFAFF: This is a segment of the Oral History Program of the Greensboro Public Library. It's being filmed in the home--taped in the home of Mr. Clyde Marsh at 2307 Maywood Street on April 13, 1979.

Mr. Marsh was an assistant chief in the firefighting division during the demonstrations in 1963. [He] is now retired from the fire department of Greensboro.

Mr. Marsh, I would like to ask you when you joined the fire department?

CLYDE MARSH: In January 1, 1941.

EP: So you were on the staff of the fire department during both the Woolworth 1960 sit-ins and the 1963 demonstrations?

CM: That's correct.

EP: Did the fire department have any role in the Woolworth sit-ins?

CM: No, we wasn't involved in that. Only to the extent that--where the people would try to block an exit way.

EP: Were you present at the Woolworth's at that time?

CM: I was not, no.

EP: I'd like to move our questioning on to the period of spring 1963, in which the A&T [North Carolina A&T State University], Bennett [College], and various other college students and adult black members of the population engaged in civil rights demonstrations in Greensboro. When did you first become aware of the demonstrations?

CM: Well, it was in the early spring, and I don't remember the dates. It was before school--the

college, that is--colleges let out for the year. And they started their demonstrations at that particular time to gain access to such restaurants as S&W [Cafeteria] and Woolworth's [lunch counter], to the theatres--the Carolina, the old Imperial I believe it was, I don't remember.

EP: And the Mayfair Cafeteria?

CM: And the Mayfair Cafeteria, correct.

EP: What was the role of the fire department during these demonstrations?

CM: Well, the idea behind it, in their viewpoint--from the demonstrators' viewpoint--was to block the exit ways, which is a direct violation of the fire codes that you are not to place any object in the exit way to any place of public assembly. They would--the demonstrators that is--would circle round and round, and then on order from their leader, which was at that particular time Jesse Jackson and Mr. James Farmer, to all at once, to jam against the exit doors--or either the entrance doors, insofar as that is concerned--which would cause, in the event of an emergency, an explosion or fire inside, that the people inside could not get out.

EP: Were they aware that they were violating the fire laws?

CM: Yes, and Jesse made this statement in my presence one time that they were doing this to emphasize their position that they weren't allowed into the restaurants because of their color and that he had to do this to get the news media, to get before the public that they weren't being recognized, so that they might go into the restaurants and theaters and so on and so forth.

EP: What--[at] which of the targeted businesses of the demonstrators were you present?

CM: I was assigned to the S&W Cafeteria on the West Market Street entranceway. And I, through information through a staff meeting, was advised how to conduct myself.

EP: What sort of advice did you receive?

CM: As long as they were circling, this was permissible. But whenever they decided to rush the door, then I was to issue the order, which I did on many occasions.

EP: Did the final authority for issuing an order for arrest rest with you or the policemen?

CM: The final authority was mine. I, I warned them three times they were in violation of the law, and then the police would move in and arrest them on my third order.

I can't help but recall when Jesse had several--and I don't know how many there were of them there--it seems like there was well over a hundred young children one night in the demonstrations--and he would force these younger children to--even though some of them rebelled against it, some of them were emotionally upset and didn't want to participate, he would forcibly force them into the circling demonstration, and then, on his order, to rush the door. And this upset me quite a bit.

As a matter of fact, the assistant manager, and I do not remember his name, I remember the manager's name as being Mr. Vincent, but the assistant manager who was guarding one of the doors to keep them out commented to me that did I have to have them arrested.

And I said, "No. I do not have to have them arrested. If you will just open the door and let them go on in, this would stop it." I said, "As a matter of fact, I'll go in and sit down at the table with them to eat." And he realized that this was beyond his powers. And he dropped his head, turned around and walked on back to the door to which he was stationed.

EP: Are you saying that he was reluctant to have the demonstrators arrested?

CM: He did not want to have [them arrested], especially the children. And, well, I didn't either. But this was, once again, Jesse's way of getting the news media to emphasize their point that they were being discriminated against.

EP: [What] was the manner in which the fire department became aware that there was going to be a demonstration on a particular afternoon or evening?

CM: This was usually through the [Greensboro] Police Department. They would keep check. And this is another ironic thing: sightseers, people who wanted to see the demonstrations, they would come up and they would get as near to the scene as they could and you could hear them hollering, "Here they come, here they come!" when they would look down East Market Street and see the demonstrators come walking in a group up to the different locations that they were going to demonstrate against.

EP: Several policemen who were on the scene at that time indicated that the CORE, the Congress of Racial Equality, coordinators called the police department to let them know that they were going to march and where they were going to march. Did CORE also call the fire department also, or did the police contact the fire department?

CM: As far as I know, the police notified us. Now, it's possible that Chief [Fred] Trulove of

the Fire Prevention Bureau may have been in [on the information]. I still think there was a collusion between Jesse Jackson, the leader of the demonstrations, and Captain Bill Jackson of the police department.

As a matter of fact, I asked Captain Jackson one night after the demonstrations why we arrested--had them arrested at S&W Cafeteria for violating the law, but yet he would let them go down to their churches and overcrowd, block aisle ways, exit ways, standing room only. And he told me that I shouldn't question what they were doing, that they knew what they were doing. So, this--no, as far as I know, no action was ever taken where they would overcrowd or block in their own churches or wherever they were meeting to decide about what action to take next.

EP: Who was the commanding officer of the fire department on the scene during these demonstrations?

CM: Chief [Calvin] Wyrick was in charge and he was there most of the time. But I would have to say Chief Trulove was the man to whom we looked to for direction. He was the one who told staff members what to do, where to be, and so on and so forth.

EP: Did you serve at any other establishment besides the S&W?

CM: No, S&W--I was assigned S&W specifically.

EP: Were you ever present at the Carolina Theatre when the demonstrators [unclear]--

CM: No. No, there was--I don't remember who the other fire prevention officers were that were assigned.

EP: Do you recall anything that your fellow fire officials said about their role during the demonstrations?

CM: No. It was an unpleasant task for all of us. We really didn't want to do this. We knew that it would be an impossibility to identify all of these demonstrators that we were having arrested. It was an impossibility. I remember going before the grand jury and they questioned me about this. Why would I go ahead and have these people arrested if I knew that I couldn't identify them? Well, at that time, it was more important to keep from having a disaster happen rather than whether or not I could identify the demonstrators.

EP: In other words, ending the danger and tension at the moment, rather than having them punished afterward?

CM: Sure, right. Because this was an impossibility to have that many people arrested and then-

EP: Could you describe the mood of the demonstrators? Was it always a tense confrontation scene, or were there ever any informal situations when there was good feeling or interaction between the demonstrators and the police and the fire officials?

CM: It was a hostile situation, because they seen their side and--well, I could see their side, too. But then, my side then--laws are made by people and people must obey the laws. We have to render those things under Caesar that are Caesar's. This is my--[laughs] this is my interpretation as to how I should act at that particular time and at any time that exit ways are blocked.

EP: Did you ever observe any activities of the white counter-demonstrators, the pickets, the hecklers that were mentioned in the newspaper?

CM: Yes, I did see them demonstrate. And, in my opinion, it's caused more harm than it done good.

EP: In what sense?

CM: Well, this--they, they gained at nothing. I mean--and we gained nothing through their demonstrations. I mean, they marched up and down Elm Street--this is where I saw them--they may have marched other streets, but this is the place that I saw them, and it was a ragtag affair. There was no organization about it; it was in retaliation to the blacks' demonstrations.

EP: Did you ever observe any instances of violence?

CM: No. No, I--no, I did not. There may have been, but I didn't see them.

EP: The newspaper indicates that the majority of arrests were pretty routine, formal affairs. As you have mentioned, you three times warned them that they were in violation of the--

CM: Fire codes.

EP: --fire laws, and then the policeman asked them to move. And when they didn't, they were arrested and then loaded into buses and police vehicles. Was it as formal and routine as that?

CM: Yes, to a great degree it was, because I'm sure Jesse and Mr. Farmer and others had told them what to expect, and they expected this. And although there were voices of protest, I never felt, myself, that it was specifically against the fire department or the fire officers who were assigned to these different locations.

EP: Did any of the demonstrators that you observed resist arrest?

CM: No, I don't recall any resisting arrest.

EP: Were they fairly disciplined?

CM: Yes. Jesse had done a good job with, with them. They expected it, and they seemed to resent more the establishment--I mean the restaurant, in my particular case.

EP: In other words, their resentment was not directed to the city officials involved?

CM: Well, as best as I could determine. Now I'm trying to say something that I really don't know how they actually did feel. But if they resented it, they never demonstrated it to me.

EP: Did you ever speak to any of the demonstrators or their leaders other than telling them that they were in violation of the fire laws?

CM: No. Oh, I might say something to Jackson, Jesse Jackson.

EP: What sort of things did you say to him?

CM: Well, I asked him if he hadn't thought that he had proved his point for tonight. I mean, you get tired of arresting people. I mean, you know that you've reached the saturation point. And he would continue on until he had reached his quota or whatever he had set out to do.

EP: Do you remember what his response was to you at those times?

CM: I don't--I don't know that I even got an answer from him. I don't know he intended to answer me, because this might have inflamed him a little further to have demonstrated even more so, to some extent. Because they were all, "Well, I'm getting to him." Maybe--but it wasn't to me that he was needing to be getting to. He needed to have gotten to the store owners or the restaurant operators, and so on and so forth. [clears throat]

EP: You mentioned that the normal or regular procedure was for them to stand on the

sidewalk, without blocking the sidewalk, and to circle and then periodically come before the door.

CM: Right.

EP: Were there any other tactics that the demonstrators used in front of the establishments that they were seeking to desegregate?

CM: Not at the S&W. If there were others at the theatres, I don't know of it. I didn't--and I didn't hear any of the other officers speak of anything.

EP: Do you recall the night of June fifth when they sat on the--in the street on Greene Street, in which Jesse Jackson was arrested and a large number of people were arrested for obstructing traffic?

CM: I wasn't on Greene Street. I do recall them sitting in the street.

EP: Did you observe them the next evening, the night of June sixth, when they sat down in Jefferson Square and again a large number of people were arrested?

CM: No, I didn't see that. As I say, I was assigned to the S&W, although I would have been in a position to have seen at least some of it. But, once again, there were a large--there were large crowds of people, and the police did a good job on this, to keep them separated--the hecklers, so to speak.

EP: Do you recall how many nights or days you were on duty?

CM: You mean straight through, or during the demonstrations at night?

EP: During the demonstrations.

CM: I believe that I was assigned four nights. It seems it was four--

EP: The newspaper states that the large demonstrations occurred from May eleventh through June seventh, which was the date of the last mass demonstration. During that period you were assigned four nights?

CM: That's correct. Now, then, they did not always go to the S&W. I mean, every night, night after night. They concentrated on other places as well, such as Mayfair, Woolworth's, and then the theatres.

EP: Did someone from the fire department have to be at each of these locations every night in case the demonstrators came there?

CM: Yes, yes someone had to be there.

EP: Did you speak personally with the management of the S&W about the procedure they wished to follow during the demonstrations?

CM: No, no I did not. Chief Trulove may have. The only contact that I had was with the assistant manager the night that I spoke of when we had so many of the children arrested.

EP: In other words, you knew that the management didn't--did not want them to be admitted, and that if they stood in the door, they would be in violation of the law?

CM: Well, now Mr. Vincent made this very plain to Chief Trulove and to the other staff officers in [the] Fire Prevention [Bureau], as well as the police department, that it was not a policy of S&W to admit blacks.

EP: Did--do you recall when you went back on regular duty? In other words, firefighting duties not connected with the demonstrations.

CM: Well, I was--I was actually on firefighting duty, and this was the reason in the discrepancy there of my being assigned four times. I was assigned as an assistant chief in charge of firefighting, and this happened to be the nights that I was on duty, the four that I speak of. There wasn't enough of Fire Prevention officers.

EP: Do you think the fire department was prepared for the large number of demonstrators involved? Did they anticipate there'd be this many people?

CM: Well, I can't speak for the fire department as a whole, but I certainly didn't expect that many myself. I'm sure the intelligence in the police department were aware, but I certainly wasn't aware.

EP: You mentioned that you spoke on at least one occasion with Captain William Jackson. Did you have occasion to observe his actions during the course of the demonstrations at the S&W?

CM: No. And I don't know that Captain Jackson--he probably had a command post placed somewhere and was in touch by radio. I did not see Captain Jackson at any time during

my assignments at the S&W.

EP: Did you have occasion to speak with the policeman who was on duty with you at the S&W?

CM: Well, no, not specifically. There were, there were several policemen on duty. I mean, to handle this many demonstrators, there had to be several.

EP: But you didn't talk informally or casually.

CM: No, no. No, I did not.

EP: Were you in charge--were you stationed there individually or were you in charge of other fire department personnel at the scene?

CM: No, I was the only one assigned at that particular time.

EP: What is your overall impression of the course of the demonstrations? Do you think that Greensboro lived up to its reputation as a liberal, progressive city in handling the situation in a low-key manner?

CM: In my opinion, as I stated in our opening conversation, that this should have never have happened. I have mixed feelings about this. I think that this could have been, been done, accomplished, by top-level city officials and top-level blacks talking the situation over.

I can't forget, my wife and I went in sometime after the demonstrations and had lunch at the S&W. And to my amazement there sat about four Negroes eating. Now they were sitting there minding their business, eating their lunch. It didn't phase me one bit. I mean, it just--in my opinion, it was all so unnecessary, and I question as to whether or not this couldn't have been handled more discreetly. I think that the sit-in at the Woolworth's restaurant got out of hand. I think maybe the news media grasped this, and it went all over the United States, all over the world, and this just got out of hand. If it could have been held--but then we question today whether or not the demonstrations are being held because the black colleges aren't getting their fair share of the money.

EP: How soon after the demonstrations did you and your wife go to eat at the S&W?

CM: It was probably right after or maybe even during--no, it wouldn't have happened during, but right after the demonstrations.

EP: So S&W desegregated rather early?

CM: Oh, yes, sure. This, this is all it entailed. As I told the assistant manager when he asked me if I had to arrest those children, that if he would just let them go on in, there would be no problem and I would go on in with them, and sit down at a table with them. Since it was a policy and he couldn't control it, well--

EP: What was the attitude of the black community to the fire department during and after the demonstrations? Was there hostility or resentment?

CM: There was hostility towards the fire department, which was--which hurt us deeply. We had just--as a matter of fact, Chief [Robert L.] Powell and I had, along with some other instructors, had just trained twenty-eight black men. And they were assigned to the fire department at Station Four down on Gorrell Street. And a lot of them were A&T graduates. And I was in charge of them, also. And I'm sure that they felt--although some of them said that they could sympathize with my position--I'm sure that some of them felt that I shouldn't have done what I did--had all of these arrested. But there was--I had no other choice. I mean it--and this was fulfilling Jesse Jackson's desires.

EP: What is your reaction to the way Greensboro handled the 1963 demonstrations in terms of how other cities and other states handled theirs?

CM: I think that we were more progressive in accepting the black community, but, but we still were slow. I mean, we still didn't progress as fast as we could have. This had been going on since the introduction of slavery, and it's something that, I'm sure, the black community just couldn't get over overnight. And they still haven't gotten over it, because it still isn't completely settled.

EP: Were you involved, as a fire department official, in any subsequent civil rights demonstrations or unrest?

CM: Well, the later, what we called the riots at A&T [in May, 1969]. I did have a command position when on duty at that particular time, when the shooting both by the blacks and by our own police was taking part. We had fire alarm boxes, as we know them--as were coded alarms on campus, and they were pulled constantly. We would send our trucks--a limited, not a full contingent of trucks--but we would send enough trucks in there to knock down a fire. And of course, they went in with their lights on and the big old red fire truck was a sitting duck, and some of them were shot at.

EP: Was anyone injured?

CM: No, no, no one that I know of. I do know I was in command one night when one of our trucks had answered a call, I believe on Stedman Street, across a little wooded area from A&T. And if I remember correctly, it was a--either a flooded oil circulator or maybe a kitchen stove fire, and the men radioed back that they were drawing hostile fire from the campus. And they got out and got under the truck and I ordered them away from--just to get--as soon as possible to get back into the truck and leave the scene. We had a rather stubborn battalion chief who took a hand extinguisher up into the apartment and put the fire out. And as soon as they could clear the area, they did.

EP: Do you think that they were drawn down there as targets for snipers, or that it was just a nuisance factor pulling the alarm, and that the--whoever was doing the firing just happened to see them and took shots at them?

CM: Oh, well, I'm sure the shooting--firing at the fire apparatus was a coincidence that happened. They had their weapons there and--

EP: So it was just spontaneous rather than planned?

CM: Yes, I don't think that, in so far as the people whose apartment was on fire, I don't think that they were a part of it. I mean, they called in a legitimate call, and they were fired upon by these--well, it didn't have to be students, it could have been infiltrators. We had an emergency operations command post set up at city hall, whereby the operations deputy chief--at that time, R.L. Powell, who is now present chief--he commanded it most of the time. And in getting relief, he would ask me at different times to take over and operate.

And I remember one morning when he came into my room at Central Fire Station about--well, between five and six o'clock and he said, "Clyde," he said, "we had a tragedy to happen last night." And my goodness, I could foresee a policeman being shot or something. And he said "A man was killed."

I asked him, "A policeman?"

And he said, "No."

And I said, "Well, I know it wasn't a fireman."

He said, "No," he said it was a black student had been shot and killed.

And I asked him if it was by our police, and he said, "I don't think so." He said, "I really don't know. But," he said, "from all indications, he was shot by someone other than our police."

Of course, the National Guard was on the scene, too. But, of course, they weren't--at that time, they weren't issued ammunition, so it wasn't--couldn't have been them. He was of the opinion that it was probably either someone from out of the fire and police departments and National Guard who just did it because he resented the rioting and so on and so forth.

EP: Was the fire department involved in any other incidents of this nature, involving civil rights confrontations?

CM: No, I don't, I don't recall any other situations where we were involved in.

EP: Was there any resentment on the part of your brother officers toward the demonstrators?

CM: You mean by this, the other officers? You mean within the fire service?

EP: Within the fire service.

CM: No. I think that some of them thought that I should have been more aggressive and arrested more people, or something of this nature. But, as I said, Chief Powell and myself had just completed this training of twenty-eight blacks, and we did get some resentment from them. But this is only natural that we would have.

EP: Was the fire department integrated prior to the '63 demonstrations?

CM: No. Now then, this I probably should make clear. These twenty-eight blacks were put down in one station by themselves, which in itself, in my opinion--and both Chief Powell and myself requested that they be integrated with the whites throughout the city, rather than being put down in a station by themselves in a black neighborhood.

EP: But that decision was made by Chief Wyrick?

CM: Well, Chief Wyrick, and, of course, I'm sure the city manager and others had to approve of it also.

EP: After that time, was there substantial integration of the fire department throughout the city?

CM: No, and I don't remember how long it was before they finally--or we--finally did integrate the whole department.

EP: Was there much resistance to integration within the department?

CM: Oddly enough, the request for integration came from the firemen themselves.

EP: Do you recall who specifically made that request?

CM: No, but they were wanting a shorter workweek. And in order to do this, it meant that it would mean reducing the number of men at Station Four. And, of course, the only way of doing this was to integrate the fire service.

EP: Which was Station Four?

CM: That's on Gorrell Street. And from there, they integrated the entire department, which, in my opinion, should have been done to begin with. They should never have been assigned twenty-eight men--twenty-eight new men, black, white, yellow, whatever, should never go into a fire station by themselves.

EP: In summing up, what is your overall conclusion about the demonstrations and the results for Greensboro?

CM: In my opinion, as bad as it was, Greensboro is a better place for all races, regardless. And this is not only from a black/white standpoint, but from a Hispanic standpoint, also. So, we were slow in doing it, but in my opinion Greensboro is a better place because of it.

[End of Interview]