

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

INTERVIEWEE: Roy C. Millikin

INTERVIEWER: Eugene E. Pfaff

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[Begin Tape 1, Side A]

PF: --of the Oral History Program of the Greensboro Public Library. I'm speaking with Mr. Roy C. McMillan--Millikin, I beg your pardon--about his experiences on the Greensboro City Council. First of all, I was wondering if I could get some brief biographical information from you, sir.

M: Get anything I got. [laughter]

EP: When and where were you born?

RM: I was born in Randleman, North Carolina, in 1894. So I'm eighty-seven years old, be eighty-eight next month.

EP: And where did you go to school?

RM: I went to Guilford College for--mainly--I went to Western Maryland College [now McDaniel College] and Oak Ridge [Military Academy]. Graduated Oak Ridge and went to Western Maryland College, I mean Guilford College, and then went to Western Maryland College for one year. Came back to Guilford College and I did not finish. I was a junior there when I left.

EP: I see. And what were your, the major studies? What was your major?

RM: Well, I didn't have any major. In those days you just didn't, you didn't have a major. You might have, might be majoring on something. But they didn't have any--I don't know hardly how to express that. But--

EP: You didn't select a field of study.

RM: No, that's right.

EP: What was your career in? How did you begin your career?

RM: Real estate business.

EP: I see.

RM: I'm the only living charter member of the Greensboro Real Estate Board.

EP: Is that right?

RM: Yeah.

EP: Did you begin your prac[tice]--real estate business here in Greensboro?

RM: Yes, right after World War I.

EP: When did you first decide to run for council?

RM: Well, it was sometime in 1958. I don't remember just what month it was, but 1958 was the year I ran and was elected. Elected three times; 1965 was when I went off the council.

EP: I see.

RM: Voluntarily.

EP: What would you say were the principal issues involved in your various terms on the council?

RM: Well, you know a councilor doesn't have many real outstanding things to, to talk about like, like might come up today. But the first thing we were faced with was the question of water. And the previous council had lost the bond issue by the people voting against it. So we were very careful in trying to--in fact, I, I made a, I made an issue [of] letting the people know what, what they're getting.

In other words, the one before that was just very poorly advertised. People, you know, just didn't want to walk up and vote for a bond issue just so, just to be taxed. So I, along with others, and especially Mead[?], insisted on if we're going to have a bond issue that it be thoroughly given to the people in every, every, everything that would help them

in the future, and the city of Greensboro mainly, in the future. In other words, we figured on water for 2000, the year 2000.

And we finally came up with and decided to vote--call for a bond issue, which we did. And it was passed. And they had the reservoir, which is now Lake Townsend, and a very, very efficient, very efficient operation.

EP: Who were the other council members on that first council with you?

RM: Well, there was Mayor [George] Roach, who was the first one. And you've, you've asked me a question, I can't give you an exact answer, because I'm so mixed up. But there was Bill Trotter [later mayor], and a colored boy, Waldo Falkener, and I really don't believe I can call the names of the ones that were on that first council with me.

EP: So the bond issue did pass?

RM: The bond issue passed, yes.

EP: What other issues on that first council come to mind?

RM: Well, there was several things, minor, whether they would be interesting. The coliseum was one big question. And the [Greensboro] City Hall was another big question. They were all discussed. But the coliseum was being built when we were on the council.

EP: In other words, all the controversy about its selection, site selection had already been settled?

RM: That had been settled, except the fact that the previous council had bought a site that this council didn't think was the right site and refused to abide by it.

EP: Which site was that?

RM: Where the towers is now, tower. And we, we agreed to give it back to the owners, because it had a moral obligation to do that if it wasn't used for a coliseum. One--two or three members of the council didn't like it, but we put it over anyhow and gave it back to the people there. And that was--and then we did, we did, this council--what am I trying to say now? This council, we--that thing there talking, is it? [?] What I'm trying to say is that we, we, we dedicated the coliseum. We did that.

And then one other issue that I think was an, is an outstanding issue, was an outstanding issue, was bringing Guilford College into the city of Greensboro.

EP: What was involved in that?

RM: Well, involved in that was a question. There was a prior council [that] had had an argument with the, with the Guilford College over a water bill, about three thousand dollars, and had threatened to sue the college. Then some of the council members didn't want to bring the college into the city unless they paid that bill. Well, I was against that. I said it's a worthwhile college, and it ought to be brought in. And it'd be worth something to advertise Greensboro with another institution. And we voted it in. It wasn't majority, but anyhow it was brought in, along with some extra, extra territory around it.

EP: Were the residents opposed to this?

RM: No. There was no, no opposition to it. The college wanted to come in very, very badly. And I felt like that it would be an asset to the city to have them in there, because we could advertise, you know, three or four colleges like we have, and--

EP: Could you characterize some of the people on the council, such as--you've mentioned Mr. Trotter. What was he like?

RM: Well, Trotter was a, a very likeable person and one that would--I, I, I hate to say this, but he wasn't a man that would study the issues very much. He would come up to the council meetings with a--and go along or not go along and all that. But he wasn't a student of what the city needed. That's my honest opinion about it. He was a nice person and, and possibly a good councilman.

EP: How about Mayor Roach?

RM: Mayor Roach was the best. And he, when he ran--I, I went to him the night of the, the next day after the election and asked him if he wanted to be mayor again. He was mayor prior, prior. He said, "I don't know. I'll have to talk to my wife." I said, "Well, you go and do it right away so that we can get it and not have any split on this thing, and you can be reelected."

And that's what he did. We reelected him as the mayor. He was a personable fellow, a fellow that everybody liked. And he didn't, he wasn't one of these fellows that opposes everything. He'd more or less go along when, when he thought it was right, he'd go along with it.

EP: Was it the tradition then that the man that received the largest number of votes became the mayor?

RM: Well, it was, you might say, a tradition. It wasn't a matter of fact. It was just a, just a solid tradition.

EP: But it was up to the council to elect the mayor?

RM: That's right, up to the council to elect the mayor.

EP: I see. Then if you were on the council from '58 to '65, then obviously you were on the council during the sit-ins at the lunch counters.

RM: Yes.

EP: Do you recall any discussions about that on the council?

RM: Well, I recall this. That after that Dr. [George] Simkins, who is now an NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] head and was the head then, came before the council and almost demanded that we do something about a committee or something to solve these problems, you know. And mayor--David Schenck was the mayor at that time--he appointed me as chairman of a committee to bring in whatever I wanted in the way of a resolution or a commission or whatever, whatever.

And I took the thing and studied it about a week and came up with the idea of an eight-member commission called Human Relations Commission. And by the way, I believe, I believe it was the first one in the South. When I finish telling you the story, I'll go in to tell you [unclear]. But if it wasn't, it was one of the first.

But I came up with the idea of four whites and four blacks on it. One or two--one of the members wanted to make it majority whites, you know. And I disagreed with that. And we came up with that. And I, I looked just a while ago. I've got a story in the paper about my bringing it in and, and all the things I recommended, but I couldn't find it. We're sort of in the process here of moving to the Friends Home [retirement community], and we've got a lot of stuff mixed up and packed away, you know.

EP: Now you had mentioned it was your idea to have it balanced, four whites, four blacks.

RM: Yeah, yeah.

EP: Was anyone opposed to that?

RM: No, they wasn't opposed to it. Well, there was one, one member of the council suggesting four and--three and five.

EP: Do you remember who that was?

RM: No, I do not. I'd be afraid to say even if I did. [laughs]

EP: I understand that Mr. [Roger] Matthews and a third gentleman were--was on that coun[cil]--that committee with you. Is that correct?

RM: That's right.

EP: And the third gentleman's name was--

RM: What was it? There's a good question.

EP: Mr. [Tartt] Bell, yourself, and Mr. Matthews.

RM: Oh, yeah, Bell. Yeah. It was Bell, and myself and Matthews. Yes.

EP: Did the three of you discuss that?

RM: Yes, we discussed it in my home at night. I, I'm frank to say I did most of the work on it, and that--which would be natural, you know, and came up with quite a few of the ideas that we brought in.

EP: What were some of the ideas you came up with?

RM: Well, the main thing was to have a--make it four and four. That was the main thing I wanted. I didn't want--and let them elect their own chairman, not appoint a chairman. And I don't know, I don't know of any special thing--

EP: Who, who was responsible for inviting people to serve on this committee?

RM: Well, the city council, as a whole, and anybody, any council member could bring in a name, which the various council members did bring in names.

EP: Did you vote on who to extend an invitation to?

RM: Yes. We voted, we voted--well, and it was, we just, we just picked out eight people and voted on them. That was all we did.

EP: I know that eventually the man who became chairman of that committee was Mr. W. O. Conrad of Western Electric.

RM: Yeah, that's right.

EP: Do you recall how he was invited? Why his name was mentioned or--

RM: No. He was right much of an integrationist.

EP: I see.

RM: And we felt like somebody like that should be on the council. I did, and I think the others did, too. I'm not, not reading their mind. But as I remember, that was one of the ideas that I had, along with maybe the others had the same idea. But I felt like that Mr. Conrad had a good--he was with Western Electric. And he was a very liberal man. And I felt like it needed both, both kinds on there.

EP: Oh, so you also selected some conservatives?

RM: We, we--no, we didn't pick them because of their conservatism. We picked them because we felt like they were fair businessmen of Greensboro interested in the city.

EP: Was--were the black members appointed from the black community?

RM: No, they were appointed from the council. And I don't remember that any black man was brought, name was brought in by a black person.

EP: So they were all suggested by the council?

RM: I think, I think that's true. And they were very careful selections. It was an excellent committee, worked out that way. And I--excuse me a minute.

EP: Sure.

RM: And I, and I suggested the name of the Human Relations Commission. And I believe that we, this was the first commission in the South. I'm sure it was one of the first. And then we later appointed a full-time director, which I believe was the first director of the Human Relations Commission in the South.

EP: Going back, if I may, to, to the things that brought--led up to this, do you recall how you heard of the sit-ins at Woolworth's and Kress store[s] in the spring of 1960?

RM: Well, I don't, I don't recall except through voice, possibly police. We were just informed. I wouldn't--how, I don't remember.

EP: Was it ever brought before a council at a council meeting?

RM: Not that I know of.

EP: Did you ever meet with any of the legal representatives or the businessmen who were being picketed?

RM: No. The mayor did. I didn't.

EP: I see. Do you recall the appointment of the committee under Mr. [Edward R.] Zane?

RM: What committee was that?

EP: According to the newspaper, Mr. Zane, who I understand was on the council--

RM: Yes, yes.

EP: --asked that he head a committee to try to get the two sides talking.

RM: I never heard of that before.

EP: Oh, I see. So the council had no, no input into that at all.

RM: No, no. This commission was turned over to them. They called a meeting right away and elected a chairman and started having meetings. And if anybody wanted to go before them--of course, they had no vote on anything. But if anybody wanted to bring any discussion or any, any question up, could, could do it.

EP: I understand that there was an earlier committee set up under Bland Worley. Do you remember this committee?

RM: No. It wasn't set up--it might have been set up in the chamber of commerce. He was in, he was in the [Greensboro] Chamber of Commerce. He was not a councilman, you know.

And I don't know of any committee that they had. I've never heard of it if they had one. They may have had.

EP: I see. Do you recall when Mayor Schenck briefed the council that was elected on May sixteenth in 1963? He said there was--he more or less briefed you all on, on the racial demonstrations.

RM: Yeah.

EP: Do you recall what he said?

RM: No, I do not.

EP: I see. What, what was his role in, in, in this whole disturbance?

RM: Well, Mayor Schenck was very even-minded about it. He wasn't, wasn't for either side, as far as being--he wasn't an integrationist, nor neither was he anything else except just the mayor. And he acted very wisely in all his moves in this thing, in my opinion.

Of course, I think, I think this committee, when they, when they saw, when they appointed eight people and let them have a chance at electing their own chairman and all that, I think that kind of quieted the neighborhood. I'm sure it did.

EP: Well, do you remember the night after night of the marches that went on downtown?

RM: Yes, I do.

EP: Did you ever see any of them?

RM: Yes, I did. And we, we met at the city hall with the lights out on two or three occasions, so--and watched, watched from the city hall to see what, to get an idea of what was going on, without them knowing we were there as far as--there wasn't any secret about it except just a matter of, of seeing from a city hall window what was going on.

EP: And what, what did you see?

RM: Well, it was just mostly youth running up and down the streets, you know, and carrying on. I don't know how to characterize it, because they didn't destroy anything that I recall. It was just mostly demonstrating. That's about all I can say.

EP: Did any of you ever discuss it amongst yourselves?

RM: Yes, of course we did. And I discussed it with the black on the council. And he was very--the black people didn't, weren't too strong for him because they thought he was an Old [Uncle] Tom. But he wasn't. He was working for them all the time, but not just out in a loud voice, you know. And I talked with him about things that we could do for them and all that. What I said I don't remember, but I do remember talking to him about it.

EP: Did, did the council ever discuss it as a council--officially, as a, as a part of the agenda?

RM: I don't remember that they discussed it, other than the time that Dr. Simkins came up there. They, they questioned him. And what they said, I've forgotten.

EP: It's my understanding at that time, he presented about twelve demands to the council. Is that right?

RM: I don't remember that he did. I don't think, I don't--I remember asking him, "Are you demanding something?" And he said no. So, see, I was trying to be--I didn't like his voice, because it was more or less in a, in a demanding way. In other words, "If you don't do [what I want], something will happen." He didn't say that, but just his voice sounded like that. And I asked him the question I just said, and he said no.

EP: Do you recall what recommendations this committee had besides appointing the Human Relations Commission? I believe that some of the suggestions were integrating the police force and the city schools and things like that.

RM: I don't remember any of that, any discussion of that at all on the council or council members.

EP: Do you recall when, during this same period, there was an emergency meeting of council to select sites where, where the trials of those people arrested might be held, and that it was held in the evening and it only lasted two or three minutes? Do you happen to recall that meeting?

RM: I really do not.

EP: I see. This would have been at the time when all the students were being held down at the polio hospital.

RM: Yeah.

EP: But you do not recall.

RM: No, I do not.

EP: Well, moving right along, what was your assessment of Mayor Schenck? You, you've mentioned Mr. Roach and Mr. Trotter.

RM: Well, he was a very young man and very levelheaded person, a fellow that I had a lot of respect for. And he gave me an awfully nice letter when--the end of my term. And I gave him a nice sendoff in the paper. So we, we both got along fine together.

EP: How about some of the other council members, such as Mr. Bell, Mr. Matthews, Mr. [Forrest] Campbell?

RM: Mr., Mr. Bell was a very nice person and a fellow--rather interesting. And when you think back, he was, he was trying to get the decal and put on automobiles. And they sort of lashed him out on it, and he never did get anything done. Of course, since then it has been put on, you know. But as far as anything particular, I don't know of anything that he did other than be a good, good councilman and go along with the better things of the council. And who else did you say?

EP: Mr. Matthews.

RM: Mr. Matthews. Well, I, I hate to comment on him, because, you know, he's been, been in the penitentiary recently, or at least he was sentenced to the penitentiary. I, I thought he was rather negative. But I have nothing against him and know nothing against him, except what the Internal Revenue Bureau [sic] found out.

EP: Negative--you mean while he was on the council, he was negative.

RM: Yes. He didn't, he wasn't very--I didn't think he had any real ideas about moving forward or anything of that kind. Maybe he thought I didn't have. But I'm, I'm sure he was, he was--he was elected really by his school, he was--General Greene [Elementary] School. There were so many young people. He was one of the young people on the council. And they gave him a tremendous vote and he was elected that way.

EP: How about Mr. Campbell, Mr. Forrest Campbell?

RM: Forrest Campbell was a very good councilman. He was a man that would listen to anything, and was not bullheaded and didn't have any dogmatic ideas, and more or less

would go along with what he thought was right and vote that way. I, I--he always supported me in everything that I undertook, and I liked him very much.

EP: Basically, just to sum up this part of your council career, there were some charges by the various segments of the community, principally the black community, that the council wasn't doing anything at the time these demonstrations took place. How would you respond to that?

RM: Well, I, I would say they were just about right in a sense, because the council wasn't--I guess, they were times, generally speaking, nobody was doing anything particular that I can remember. But the council was not opposed to the blacks at all. In fact, they, they listened to Waldo Falkener, a black councilman. And they, they, they, generally speaking, there was no opposition to what they, what they wanted and normally we could give. I don't think they ever really demanded very much from our council, except during that uprising. And that was--and Dr. Simkins more or less took charge and brought about this Human Relations Commission.

EP: You have mentioned that, that the council wasn't--had not been asked many things by the black community. One suggestion was a public, what was called a public accommodations ordinance, requiring desegregation in the businesses. What was the council's attitude towards that?

RM: I don't remember that they ever had that.

EP: All right. If it had, what, what would have been the council's attitude?

RM: Well, the council, I'm sure, would have gone along with liberalizing some of the things that the city could do, like appointing some firemen and policemen and those things, which they hadn't been doing, as you know. I'm sure that they would have gone along if it, if it had really been a demand for it.

EP: Was there much contact of the council by state or federal government representatives during this time?

RM: No, there wasn't.

EP: From Governor [Terry] Sanford or anything?

RM: No, not that I know of.

EP: I remember one thing that was mentioned in the paper was that the black community wanted the council to meet in special session and announce that they were for equal opportunity to everyone. And what Mayor Schenck did, instead of calling a council meeting, contacted individual council members by telephone.

RM: Yes.

EP: Do you recall that?

RM: I do not.

EP: I see. So, in summing up this period, what--you've mentioned the coliseum, you've mentioned the water, providing water to the city up to the year 2000--[clears throat] Excuse me--and appointing the Human Relations Commission. What, what would you say during this period were the most outstanding achievements of the council?

RM: Well, I don't think the council really had any, too many outstanding things, because it was a time of tranquility. It was not much demand for this or that. But the council did work together very well and, and listened to the people very well. And I, I think we must have made friends, because I got letters from Dr. [William?] Hampton, who was then the school superintendent, you know, and different, different members of the black race, thanking me for what I had done for them and all that kind of thing. I don't remember too much prodding by them on us at all. I don't think there was too much at all.

EP: What--all right, this takes us up through 1963. What remaining issues were, were brought on, before the council up to the time you stepped down from council in 1965?

RM: Well, frankly, I, I couldn't really tell you. Of course, one of the big issues was downtown. And I made several trips to various cities all over the United States with the chamber of commerce looking at what other cities had done, you know. Like Rochester, New York; and Norfolk, Virginia; and Baltimore; and various places. I was the one that went along on all those trips. And we, we tried to come up with some idea.

And I came up with an idea that the chamber of commerce president opposed. And today I notice they are talking about that same idea now, but not because I brought it up, but a lot of strangers coming up now. I wanted the city to appoint a downtown committee composed of taxpayers--not only property owners, but taxpayers and people out of town that owned property down here--and have a full-time director, and let him work on businesses coming into Greensboro and businesses staying in Greensboro.

And the president of the chamber of commerce--I got a write-up on that somewhere too--opposed my idea very strongly, and it didn't go over. But the council was for it, I'm sure of that. But it just never came to a vote.

I don't know of any particular thing other than the daily needs of the city that came up before us. And of course, like appointing members of different committees and, and spending money for different things. But for any particular thing, I don't know of any outstanding thing. I really don't.

EP: Why did you decide to step down from the council in 1965?

RM: Well, I just decided I'd had, served enough time. And I thought I'd let somebody else try it. It was my decision. I might have been beaten. I don't know about that. But I, I made a decision myself. It wasn't made by somebody else.

EP: Thank you very much, Mr. McMillan--Millikin! [laughs] I'm--

[End of Interview]