

PRESERVING OUR HISTORY: ROTARY CLUB OF GREENSBORO
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

INTERVIEWEE: Charles Hassell

INTERVIEWER: Kathelene Smith

DATE: July 10, 2011

KS: Good morning, Dr. Hassell. My name is Kathelene Smith, and this interview is for the Preserving our History: Rotary Club of Greensboro oral history project. Good morning, and thank you for having me to your home.

CH: Good morning. I'm glad to be here and appreciate your coming.

KS: Thank you. Please tell me when and where you were born.

CH: I was born and reared in Charlotte, North Carolina. Born July 1932. I'm about to have my seventy-ninth birthday this week.

KS: Well, happy birthday!

CH: Thank you. Went to public schools, Myers Park Elementary, which is no longer there. And then, to a junior high school and Central High School, which was a student body of over 1,200. My graduating class was 400 and something. And I was one of four student speakers that spoke at our graduation ceremony. I went from Davidson – I went from high school to Davidson College.

KS: That's great.

CH: And did a pre-med major at Davidson. And went from Davidson to the University of Pennsylvania Medical School in Philadelphia.

KS: Wonderful! Well, can you tell me a little bit about growing up in Charlotte?

CH: I grew up in Charlotte in Myers Park. We had a nice home. My father was a hard-working life insurance salesman. It was a nice home – not particularly elaborate, but it was a nice neighborhood. I just had to walk out the back door, and I was on the playground for my school. I enjoyed Charlotte very much. I had four or five fellas that I hang around with, and several of them are no longer living. But they all went on to be successful business or professional men. One of them became president of the University in Chapel Hill. One of them became my roommate at Davidson, and we belonged to Myers Park Presbyterian Church. My mother was a

musician. She was a soprano soloist. And my father, as I said, was a life insurance salesman and spent a lot of time on the road.

KS: What were your favorite things to do when you were growing up, or your favorite subjects in school?

CH: I liked scientific subjects. I was not particularly – I was not outstanding as an athlete in any sport, although I enjoyed playing athletics. I usually got beat up by the other fellas because I was not particularly good, big or strong, but I enjoyed it. Subject were, as I said, science, biology, and things that headed me into medicine. I decided early on that I wanted to be a doctor. And decided early that I wanted to go to Davidson, and I was fortunate to get into Davidson, which is an excellent school. At that time, Davidson was all male, only 750 students.

KS: Now, was there anything in particular – you said you decided early – was there a particular moment you knew, or did it come on gradually?

CH: No, I don't think it – I think it came on gradually. I think it was the association with the physicians that we knew, and our family physicians. I just admired them and wanted to do that kind of work. Looked to me like they were helping other people, and that's sort of what I wanted to do.

KS: So, you went to Davidson. And so, tell me about your time at Davidson. You loved it, obviously.

CH: I liked Davidson very much. Davidson, as I said, was all male, 750 students. The fraternity system was not – they did not have fraternity houses as such. We had fraternities, but they just sort of got together. They were an eating club really. Everybody lived in the dorms. I had a roommate who was from Charlotte who went on to a different medical school and was a pathologist in Asheville, North Carolina, and died recently. We were very close friends. Davidson was an outstanding school, had wonderful professors. And they were very patient and very good.

KS: What things did you enjoy about Davidson when you were growing up? I know you said you participated in the eating clubs?

CH: Well, the fraternity was an eating club. I did not do any sports at Davidson. I was not – I did some debating and belonged to the debating society. I did some singing. My main outside activity was singing. I sang in the Davidson Male Chorus, which was about, oh, twenty-four people. It was a very good male chorus. And we did some traveling. And I enjoyed that. And that served me in good stead later on.

KS: So, you had your four years at Davidson. And then, you said you moved up to Pennsylvania.

CH: Then moved to Pennsylvania – went to medical school there. I met my wife, who was a nurse, on one of the floors at university hospital – Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania. She was head of the orthopedics nursing floor. I met her and immediately decided I wanted to date her, and we began dating. And she subsequently went to Cleveland where I interned. And we got married in 1989. And I did my internship in Cleveland and residency in pathology in Cleveland, and we lived together in Cleveland before coming to Greensboro.

KS: And your wife is named?

CH: Jeanne, J-e-a-n-n-e. Her maiden name was Maxwell.

KS: Okay. Well, tell me about being in medical school.

CH: Medical school was excellent. It was a very fine medical school. The philosophy at that point was if you got into medical school, they would see that you graduated. There was no fear of flunking out. It was hard work. But it was very outstanding instruction. The teaching, the surgeons, and the – everybody – everything about the medical school was excellent. And I did not stay in Philadelphia beyond my medical school – went to Cleveland as an intern. I did an internship in internal medicine. I wasn't sure at that time whether I wanted to go into medicine or pathology. So, I did a medicine internship and decided I wanted to be a pathologist and stayed there for pathology residency. While I was in Cleveland, one of the more outstanding things I did was sing in the Cleveland Orchestra Chorus, which at that time was conducted by Robert Shaw who – many people will know – who directed the Shaw Chorale. But he was also – didn't conduct the Philadelphia Symphony – I mean the Cleveland Symphony, but he did conduct the Cleveland Orchestra Chorus. And we met every Monday night, had rehearsals, which were just outstanding. It's a large chorus of over 200 people. And we sang in several concerts a year.

KS: And does your wife sing also?

CH: No, well not – she sings – no. She's not – did not sing any of these groups.

KS: So, she was your fan? [Laughs]

CH: Yes.

KS: So, how long were y'all in Cleveland?

CH: Five years.

KS: Oh, so a while.

CH: Well, residency was four years, and I had a year of internship.

KS: So then, you decided to make your move some place more permanent?

CH: Well, Moses Cone Hospital in Greensboro was formed in 1941. As you probably know, when Moses Cone died in 1911 he left the funds for the hospital to be used at the death of his wife, Bertha Cone. So, the county did not build a hospital because they said, "Well, she's going to be dying any day." Well, she lived forever. She lived until 1941, at which time the trust fund had grown considerably. And so, the hospital trustees had a lot of money to build a hospital with, and Moses Cone was built. They began finding, looking for, people to staff it – department heads. And they sent – and they found Dr. Herbert Lund in Cleveland. And that's how he came to Greensboro. He was up – he was internationally known, particularly in skin pathology. And he came back a couple of years to get – and recruited myself and another pathologist, Donald Leonard, to come to Greensboro to work at Moses Cone.

KS: So, what year did you move here?

CH: 1968.

KS: '68, okay. And so, you moved to Greensboro and settled down and stayed. You've been here ever since.

CH: Oh, yeah. Been here ever since. Love Greensboro.

KS: So, what was Greensboro like – what kind of city was it like when you first moved here?

CH: Well, it's a great deal – much as it is as today. It's always been – we always thought Greensboro was a wonderful city. It had good leadership and good law, good traffic, good departments. And we think Greensboro is an excellent town. We lived in Starmount initially, very close to Friendly Shopping Center – very convenient. Raised four children. They're all off somewhere doing well. And we have enjoyed Greensboro very much.

KS: So, y'all were a newly married couple – fairly newly married couple just moving to Greensboro. What kind of things did you do at that time? What was the thing to do in Greensboro?

CH: Well, I was pretty busy at work. And we enjoyed the symphony very much and other musical things. And the church, Myers Park – I mean First Presbyterian Church. And my wife has been involved with a number of other things.

KS: So, Joe Mullin was there, right?

- CH: Joe Mullin was there. Before that there was another – Joe Mullin was not there at that time. John Redhead was there at that time.
- KS: So, I know people have talked about enjoying things downtown like the big Christmas parade, and there were a lot of activities downtown in those earlier years.
- CH: We did not go downtown a lot. We went downtown when we needed to, and we went to parades occasionally. But we did not go, perhaps, as much as we might have.
- KS: So, tell me about your children. Did you have them all at once or –?
- CH: No, they were scattered. They – one of them is a retarded daughter. She has Down's syndrome. We raised her 'till she was twenty-one at home. And now she lives in a group home here in Greensboro, a wonderful group home. She's very happy. She's severely retarded but has no other physical defects. She lives in a group home that's managed by the Howell's Daycare Center, and they do an absolutely wonderful job. The oldest son is a superior court judge here, Judge Robbie Hassell, A. Robinson Hassell. The second is a daughter. Our daughter is a production manager for the opera company in Portland, Oregon. The third son is a musician in New York City. He plays woodwinds, mostly saxophone, clarinet. He plays woodwinds in orchestras, Broadway shows, and he's married to a French-Canadian girl who is a cellist. And they live in Jackson Heights, suburb of Queens.
- KS: That's interesting. So, you had children that have musical ability, too.
- CH: Well, they all – more than I have. They've all done very – we're very proud of them. They've done well.
- KS: That's great! So, tell me a little bit about your growing career in Greensboro. So, you were here in the '60s, and you were recruited in pathology. What happened then?
- CH: Well, there were four of us at that time in pathology, including Dr. Lund, myself, and Don Leonard, and Dr. Bill McClendon. There were – the reason we came to pathology – there were two others, and when Wesley Long built their hospital, two of them moved over there. So, that's how they came – how I came to Greensboro. And we just did the pathology work there for the hospital, which was very busy and very good. We also had a very large skin pathology practice where dermatologists and offices would do a biopsy in the office and would send the biopsy to us. We would process it and send them the report. And these were dermatologists from mostly the Southeast. But we had them all up and down the East Coast. We even had a few in the West – one from Oregon, one in – but we

tried to do a turnaround 24-hour service. And that was because Dr. Lund, Sr., was such a well-known skin pathologist.

KS: I was told you absolutely helped bring it into the modern age. So –

CH: I didn't – bring what into the modern age?

KS: Well, I was told you brought the whole pathology-radiology –

CH: I had nothing to do with radiology.

KS: Okay. That was what I – they must have meant pathology.

CH: No, I had nothing to do with radiology. That's a different specialty and different group of people who are also outstanding. But I had no – except to know them as friends. I had nothing to do with radiology.

KS: Maybe this person meant pathology.

CH: Yeah. Well, we did have a very good pathology department, and that was because of Dr. Lund who attracted the people there. And they were good pathologists, and we had strong support from the hospital. And it was a good department.

KS: So, it really grew a lot while you were there? So, anything else that you would like to talk about with your career? Any significant happenings that you want to talk about?

CH: No, but I think that much of the – you mentioned the department. Actually, a lot of that was related because the hospital did so well. And they were forward thinking and very outstanding boards of trustees the hospital had. They did an excellent job. And in 19 – I think it was 1979, a new administrator came to the hospital named Dennis Barry, and he revolutionized the hospital. It had been sort of a sleeping giant, but he revolutionized it and brought it way up to date and made it the outstanding institution it is. Had it incorporated – that's when the incorporation with Wesley Long [Hospital] began, and Annie Penn [Hospital] and the other – the Moses Cone Group, now, the Cone Hospital Group.

KS: Now, did you ever travel in your career at all? Did you bring medicine to other areas?

CH: No, not really.

KS: Just mostly – local.

CH: Yeah, I stayed at Cone.

KS: Well, that's wonderful because you were able to raise your family in one spot. That's really important. So, anything else you recall from developing your career or living in Greensboro during that time?

CH: No, except that we enjoyed Greensboro very much. We think it's a wonderful town, wonderful city. It's had good leadership all along, and we just think we could not have picked a better place to live.

KS: Now, how has Greensboro changed since you've been here?

CH: Other than to grow and get bigger and better, I don't – I don't know that it's changed. I'm not sure what you're driving at.

KS: We just were wondering if – sometimes people say that it's grown, or –

CH: Well, it certainly has grown.

KS: Downtown has kind of seen a shift, as I understand it, from being some place that was very vital, to kind of falling off for a while, to coming back into its own.

CH: Well, I think that's a pattern that's true in most cities. We've never – we never think the downtown Greensboro has really suffered badly. Although, if I were a downtown businessman I might feel differently. But it's so convenient to get downtown, and the city planners have made traffic patterns so good in Greensboro. It's very easy to get to any part of Greensboro, and I think that's very good.

KS: I think it's really interesting with the new condominiums down there. And then, of course, you've got the baseball stadium. So, there is a lot of reason to be down there and stay down there. And then with the universities, all the schools in town, it kind of, I think, makes the city vital.

CH: Yes. Yes, the universities have been very important.

KS: Now, are you involved with any of the universities? I know you went to Davidson. Or do you still keep up with – are you involved with Davidson alumni?

CH: Only – only as an alumni. Only occasionally. I'm not an officer. I have no official functions as an – in the alumni association.

KS: That's a great school, though. Any way you can think about Greensboro improving the quality of life for its citizens?

CH: I'm sure there's nothing I could think of that hasn't already been thought of.
[Both laugh]

KS: Well, I know they've gotten the water issues pretty much taken care of. And I know that was a lot of concern.

CH: I think they've just done a wonderful job. I think the city does a great job. And the city management does. No, I have nothing but – for the most part – but praise for the city government and the city management. And I'm just – we're delighted we picked Greensboro, and we love living here.

KS: Were you ever involved with local or national politics?

CH: No, not really. I've done some little – outside of my – I've done a little acting in little community theater.

KS: Okay. You've got to tell me about that!

CH: Well, that was some years ago. I used to do – used to be in a lot of the community theater. It was a little theater and then it became Community Theater. And I did some acting then on stage.

KS: Acting and singing, more like musicals or –

CH: Well, some of both. Mostly straight acting.

KS: So, what are some of your memories with that? What kind of productions did you do?

CH: Oh, just the usual kinds of shows that any amateur group would do.

KS: Greensboro has a very nice theater community.

CH: They do. Very good in the – and we still go to a lot of the productions. We're going to go see *The King and I* this week, which is at Weaver Center. Our granddaughter is in that.

KS: Oh, my goodness. So, you really have passed along the genes of music and acting.

CH: So, that's, I understand, a very good production.

KS: What about local philanthropies? Were you involved –

CH: Only as a donor.

KS: Now, tell me about joining the Rotary Club and your involvement with the Rotary.

CH: Well, I decided to join the Rotary because my contacts were just within the physician group, and I thought I needed to broaden my contacts and meet other people. And that's why I initially joined the Rotary Club, and it's turned out it's been much – it has done exactly that. I've broadened my knowledge of a lot of people. And the Rotarians are wonderful people. I've enjoyed it very much. It had good leadership. And, you know, I just love the Rotary meetings.

KS: So, have you – what have you done in particular with the Rotary? Do you have a favorite project that you worked on?

CH: No, I've never been an officer with the Rotary and never done a particular project, no. No.

KS: Well, what about any kind of hobbies – do you enjoy anything now that you're retired?

CH: No. Years ago – many years ago, I collected stamps and coins. I haven't done that for over 25 years. Still got them stuck away somewhere. But I have no hobby that I keep up.

KS: Do you enjoy traveling or – ?

CH: We love to travel. We like to travel. Not so much the last year or so.

KS: Do you like to travel internationally, or do you usually –

CH: Internationally, yes.

KS: What is your favorite place that you've gone?

CH: Well, we took – when it was still flying, the Concorde – we took a trip around the world on the Concorde.

KS: You did?

CH: I have a little model of it sitting out there on the table.

KS: How fabulous!

CH: And that was one of the most exciting trips we've ever taken. You know, it would be in the air only for a couple of hours, and it flew at Mach speed. And you'd be on – go 1,000 miles in nothing. So, that was a wonderful trip.

KS: So, y'all started from New York? Where did it start?

CH: We started from New York.

KS: And then, flew to Paris?

CH: I don't remember the details. We flew out of Egypt, and New Zealand, and Australia, and China.

KS: And it was all on the Concorde?

CH: All on the Concorde. Yes, we kept the same plane with us the whole time – same plane, same crew – and the crew would dress up in the costumes of the locals. And it was a wonderful trip.

KS: How long did it take to go around the world on the Concorde?

CH: Well, it was almost a three-week trip.

KS: How fabulous. So, what was your favorite place during that trip?

CH: Oh, I don't know that I have a favorite place. China was one of the – some of the most interesting, though, because it was the most unusual. Egypt was also very interesting.

KS: I bet so.

CH: The Sphinx and the tombs, pyramids. Got in to walk down the pyramid – into the bottom of one of the pyramids.

KS: Did you ride a camel? I've always wanted to go to the pyramids and ride a camel!

CH: My wife rode a camel. I didn't ride – she tried, but she didn't do very well.

KS: So, you went to Egypt and China, and where else have you been? Of course, you stopped in Europe?

CH: I don't remember the different stops now.

KS: How amazing. That's a shame that they stopped the [Concorde] program.

CH: It is a shame that the Concorde – they took it out of commission. There just wasn't enough demand for it, I guess. It only held ninety-eight passengers. And it was very expensive, but a lot of businessmen used to use it. They'd fly from London to New York. They'd leave London and get in New York in time to do a day's worth of business. So, I thought they would have kept going, but they didn't. They had a bad accident with the Concorde. Somebody left a piece of trash on the runway, and the Concorde picked it up, and it crashed in France. And that was a bad accident. I think that put an end to the Concorde flights.

KS: Have y'all been cruisers? Do you enjoy cruising?

CH: We've been. Not lately, but we've done some cruising.

KS: That's wonderful to be able to travel.

CH: Yes. My wife loves traveling more than I do.

KS: Oh, really? There's usually one that likes it more than the other. You have such a lovely house. It's nice to stay home, too.

CH: Well, it is a wonderful house. We got this house very fortunately. This isn't part of your story, but I'll tell you anyway. We had a nice house over in Starmount, and my wife said something about, "Do you want to move?" I said, "I'm happy here unless we can live on a lake somewhere." A few weeks later the phone rang, and I picked it up. And a man on the other end of the phone says, "We've decided to sell." And I didn't know what he was talking about. But what she had done – she drove over here and drove down to this house, knocked on the front door, and the man came to the door whom she didn't know, and she said, "Would you like to sell your house?" And it just so happened that that particular couple did like to move. They've since built two houses, and they like to move and move around. He sold it – they sold it to us for a reasonable price. They said – when it came time to talk about price I was in no bargaining position, but he said, "This is what the last house out here sold for," and that's what we bought.

KS: It's lovely.

CH: It's probably the nicest location in this development.

KS: And this is called Lands End Development –

CH: Lands End Development.

KS: So, you are right on – we're literally looking on the lake as we speak.

CH: And this is only the – it has the best view of the lake of any unit out here.

KS: So, to think that you can be literally living on a lake and seven minutes from downtown is absolutely incredible.

CH: Yes, and in a private area.

KS: Now, is this – I was thinking about this as I was driving over here – is this a manmade lake?

CH: Yes. It's the lake that Cone Mills used to back up – uses the water to run the plant down on Cone Boulevard. You know, the Cones Mill plant.

KS: Right. So, how long has this lake been here? That was what – that was around when? That's been a while.

CH: Been a long time.

KS: What a great thing to have as a result.

CH: The lake has been here longer than the road has. The road is from Elm Street – it splits – was added after the lake was in.

KS: Now, is it stocked? Do you get any fishing?

CH: You are not allowed to fish or boat. No boating, no fishing.

KS: Well, it's beautiful. And it's certainly – you have a beautiful view.

CH: We enjoy it very much. We have this nice deck here.

KS: It's really a wonderful house. So, is there anything else you would like to talk about? Is there anything we've forgotten?

CH: No. Tell me a little bit about the project you're doing, though, Kathelene?

KS: Well, this is a – as a matter of fact, you mentioned Pat Sullivan earlier. And it actually has to do with Pat Sullivan, because she approached our university archivist, at the time, named Betty Carter – she recently retired – and asked about doing a partnership with the Rotary Club for oral history interviews. In the archives, we have several types of oral history interviews. And it's kind of – I won't say it's up and coming, because oral histories have been around for a long time, and they're making a big push for them in a lot of different areas, including nationally at the national archives. Matter of fact, there was a really interesting project within the last several years where they took a booth into Grand Central Station. And they interviewed basically anybody who would be interviewed, just coming along. And now I've heard that you can even do your own family oral history and send it into the archives. So, there are all kinds of interesting ways to go on them. But we have an Institutional Memory Collection. We have a Centennial Collection. We have a bunch of them. So, they got together and thought that would be a good idea. And so, we do the interviews, and we keep the transcripts. But at some point they will all be available for access for the Rotary Club, too, and for research. And I think the Rotary's purpose, also, was to get an idea of the people who shaped Greensboro throughout the ages. And, also, their involvement with the Rotary. It's a nice project, and it will give a real context for what Greensboro was like and the people who lived here.

CH: Well, the contact you had for this project, I think, was Bob Cone?

KS: Yes. He's been helping with initial contacts.

CH: No family in Greensboro that's done – been more important to the community than the Cones.

KS: Right. And I've interviewed Alan Cone, and he's great. We had a good time.

CH: I'm sure.

KS: So, it's really been an interesting project. I've spoken at the Rotary Club twice, and a colleague and I have written an article to put in the Rotary newspaper about the project. So, it has really been wonderful.

CH: You've spoke at the Rotary Club meetings?

KS: I've been to two meetings over the last two or three years about it. So, it's really been wonderful. Everyone has been so lovely.

CH: Well, I'm not crazy about new place they're meeting in.

KS: Is it still over at the – the last time I was there it was over at the –

CH: It's at the coliseum.

KS: At the coliseum.

CH: But there have been several different rooms there, and it's in different room now.

KS: I was just in that big room where the buffet was in the hall, I guess.

CH: I think that's the same one. When they first moved into that room, the acoustics were so bad you couldn't hear anything. That's improved. I guess it will be all right.

KS: But it's been a really wonderful project. We've interviewed over twenty-five people.

CH: Oh, wonderful!

KS: Hope to interview more –

CH: Well, have you interviewed [Charles] Buddy Weill yet?

KS: I think we have. I think that was one of the first ones.

CH: Cause he's one of the most knowledgeable people about Greensboro.

KS: As a matter of fact, I interviewed Horace Kornegay before he passed away.

CH: Oh, did you.

KS: That was an interesting interview.

CH: I'm sure.

KS: So, it's been a fun project. Well, anything else that we need to talk about?

CH: No.

KS: No? Okay. Thank you so much for speaking with me today.

CH: Glad.

KS: And inviting me into your lovely home.

CH: It's nice to meet you, and I wish you well with your project.

KS: Well, thank you very much.

[Recorder turned off]

[End of interview]