

UNCG ALUMNI ASSOCIATION ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM COLLECTION

STATEMENT BY: James S. Ferguson

DATE: September 24, 1979

[Editor's note: Chancellor James S. Ferguson dictated his recollections of the 1969 student strike against the campus cafeteria vendor ARA Slater.]

[This is James S.] Ferguson speaking on September 24, 1979. I am going to give recollections of events that occurred in the late 1960s. I am often asked if UNCG [The University of North Carolina at Greensboro] had any troubles during the period of student activism during the 1960s and 1970s. And my reply has been that we had some anxious moments, some periods of crisis, but never any violence. As a matter of fact, when crises arose we were able usually to bring about a settlement of disagreements by bringing together the disputants and involve faculty, students, and administration in the solution.

The greatest moment of anxiety that I can recall in this area came on the night of March 31, 1969, and it was in connection with the cafeteria strike that was going on on this campus. There had been cafeteria strikes earlier at the university in Chapel Hill [University of North Carolina] and also at [North Carolina] A&T State University across town. Our food service, ARA or Slater's, was also the firm that served A&T State University at that time and, of course, the one against whom the strike at A&T had been directed. It was also true that many of the cafeteria workers on our campus were students at A&T. A strike here after those at the other institutions was, I suppose, inevitable, and one was initiated the latter part of March 1969. The workers quickly formed an organization and submitted a lengthy list of demands to ARA, very similar to the demands that had been presented at A&T and, indeed, the leadership of the strike was the same here that had been in evidence at A&T.

Student Government [Association] on the UNCG campus threw its support behind the workers, even to the point of utilizing money from student activity fees to hire an attorney to represent the group. The students supported the strike in a number of ways. They conducted demonstrations, noisy but never out of line. They also attempted to boycott the cafeteria. Actually the boycott worked to the advantage of Slater's, because they had anticipated the strike

and had laid in a supply of pre-packaged foods, and it was possible for them to use administrative staff and supply the food to students who came to the cafeteria. Obviously if there was a boycott, there would be fewer people there to serve and Slater would be fulfilling its contract, which required them to supply food to the students who had food contracts with them.

Seeing the futility of the boycott, the students changed their strategy and shifted to an eat-in. That is, they encouraged everyone possible to go to the cafeteria at the same time and then request as much food as would be given them. Many went back for seconds, thirds, fourths; indeed, there was a great deal of wasted food. This tactic did not succeed either in preventing Slater from meeting their obligations.

The most effective thing the students did in support of the strike was the hiring of the lawyer, one Henry C. Frye, who is currently a member of the [North Carolina] State Legislature. He met with the students and eventually with members of the administration to—in orderly discussions with regard to the strike.

It should be pointed out that the strike was not against the university but against the caterers, yet there was no way that the university could fail to be affected. It was our students who had contracted with Slater's to be provided service and the effort of the administration was directed towards seeing that food service was provided. And secondly, we supplied our good offices to speedy negotiations. We tried to provide space for meetings, enter into communication that would facilitate the arrangements of these; in other words, we tried to be the brokers that would produce a settlement of the strike.

Initially the strike was not a black and white issue. But in time it turned out that there was an element of race conflict involved because so many of the workers were blacks. And as matters developed, it seemed clear that the black workers were not enthusiastic about accepting white leadership either among the students or within the administration.

The administration did make it clear that students and workers had the right of freedom of assembly, but not the right of obstructing or of disrupting activities in the cafeteria through excessive noise. There was only one instance in which there seemed to be a direct violation of the ground rules that had been set up on this, and it was by a student from A&T State University, namely Nelson Johnson, who at that time was the vice president of Student Government at A&T.

At noon on Monday, March 31st, Mr. Johnson took a microphone to the—Mr. Johnson used some system of public address and tried to address a number of the students who were in

the cafeteria and to assemble demonstrators. A former student who was sympathetic with the strike recognized that this was in violation of the ground rules governing the use of the cafeteria for assemblies and not only confronted Nelson Johnson, but also took the microphone from his hands. This brought a tense moment of possible conflict, but after a few moments, matters did quiet down. Shortly after that, though, all of the black students marched out of the cafeteria in a group. As indicated previously, it was more difficult after this point to get the blacks to accept the leadership of even white students.

It was obvious that the workers and their student supporters did not accept the role of neutrality, which had been adopted by the administration, or the role of broker encouraging the completion of negotiation. As a matter of fact, on Sunday night, March 30th, I was asked by the president of Student Government [Randi Bryant] to come to Elliott University Center and meet with the group of students and others who wished to discuss the strike. When I arrived, I discovered that not only were the student leaders and the leaders of the workers present, but so was Mr. Frye. And considerable pressure was exerted to get me to intervene, to take sides in the matter, and to dictate a solution.

I, of course, took the position that it would not be true negotiations if I did impose a settlement. In fact, under the terms of the contract that existed, the administration did not have the power to impose a settlement. That meeting Sunday evening had a great deal to do with creating, in my mind of the feeling that that particular group would continue to exert pressure against me without giving an equal opportunity to Slater's representatives to be heard.

Following the incident in the cafeteria at noon on March 3st, excitement on the campus grew. It became evident that some kind of massive demonstration was being planned for that evening. It was announced that representatives of Slater and the workers' lawyer, Mr. Frye, would be meeting that evening to discuss the demands submitted by the workers. At mid-afternoon, I learned that Slater had not yet arranged to have a representative present at that meeting, and everything indicated that the company did not plan to have a lawyer present at that time. It was evident that such reluctance on the part of Slater's could be used very effectively by the other side to stir up a great deal of support for the strikers and might lead to actual violence.

I eventually got the head of the Slater organization in Philadelphia on the telephone. We talked for some forty-five minutes and I insisted that Slater have a legal representative present at a meeting that evening. I warned Slater's that if such a meeting were not held, it was likely that

some act of violence would occur on the campus. Late in the afternoon, ARA, or Slater's, did arrange for Mr. Thornton Brooks, a local attorney with extensive experience in legal negotiations, to represent the firm at the meeting that night.

Since Mr. Frye was already in the State Legislature, special arrangements had to be made for the negotiations to start quite late in the evening, for Mr. Frye had to complete some of his work in connection with the legislative session. However, as I remember it, about 8:30 or 9:00, Mr. Brooks and Mr. Frye with some other representatives met in the conference room of Foust Administration Building. In the meantime, Mr. Nelson Johnson and student body leaders had recruited a number of supporters from the dormitories, and a crowd in excess of a thousand, perhaps as high as fifteen hundred gathered outside Foust Administration Building to lead cheers communicating to the negotiators inside the support of the group for the workers.

Mr. Frye was somewhat dismayed by this. He came outside and said essentially, to the students, "You're trying to help me? Well, if so, do not engage in this behavior. Go over to the student union and wait until the meeting is over and I will come give you a report." As matters turned out, a considerable percentage of the students did go to Cone Ballroom, and the next several hours were spent in hearing speeches by such people as Nelson Johnson, who were doing all they could to encourage some kind of overt action on the part of the students.

The negotiations went on for only forty-five minutes to an hour, and Mr. Frye went over to report that agreements had not been reached in that session, there would be later ones. But the group stayed in Cone Ballroom and continued to have its emotional session. Mr. Johnson was given to black power rhetoric and he eventually made a speech in which he said, "The chancellor could settle this strike if he wanted to. We need to march on his house and tell him that he must settle it. And if there's not the right kind of response, then we'll throw a few bricks through the door." That's the way I had it reported to me, thought I understand that Mr. Frye and others understood that there were threats to burn the Chancellor's House.

In any case, the student body leaders who had joined in supporting the strike with great enthusiasm were alarmed by such wild talk as that coming from Mr. Johnson and his associates. They were inclined to fall away from the movement, but on the other hand, they were wise enough to know that if they left the meeting it really would be controlled by the radicals and the acts of violence probably would occur. At that point, Miss Bryant announced to the group that

there would be convocation the next day at which the chancellor would explain the issues of the strike.

The group—this promise was made before there had been any communication with me, although the group began its efforts to get in touch with me immediately. The first I heard of this matter—and it, as I remember it, this particular event occurred about 1:00 a.m. or slightly thereafter—I received a telephone call from Matt Walker, a reporter for the *Greensboro Daily News*. I had just had about five minutes of sleep when that telephone call came and the first thing I heard was the question from Mr. Walker about the convocation that I planned to have the next day. And my first response was, “Who, me?” Then I realized that I needed to be further informed about developments.

And I said to Mr. Walker that I had not been in communication with some of my advisors in the last twenty minutes and I requested that he call me back at a later time. Almost immediately after I hung up the telephone I received the call from Miss Bryant indicating that she had announced that there was to be a convocation at which I would explain the issues of the strike. My first reaction was that this was the same kind of pressure that had been exerted against me on the Sunday night when I had been called to Elliott Hall to meet with just one side in the dispute. However, in time I did agree to have the convocation and even agreed reluctantly to have it at the early hour that had been set by Miss Bryant. As I recall it, the meeting was to be at nine o’clock. At any rate, following our agreement that must have come about 3:30 or 3:45 in the morning, I had to spend most of the remainder of the night planning what I was to say at the convocation.

Aycock Auditorium was packed and jammed. The convocation turned out quite well. I made an initial statement and centered much of my statement—Let me start that over. I made an initial statement, which gave a lot of attention to the threats of violence that had been made, and I pointed out that the threats were made not by UNCG students but from persons who had come from off the campus. Following my statement, we had a period, an answer period in which many students directed questions to me and I tried to answer them. It was evident at the end of the convocation that the overwhelming majority of students on the campus had been frightened by the threats of violence. They may have been sympathetic with the workers but they would not countenance the kind of actions that Mr. Johnson had encouraged. The overwhelming majority of the students supported the principle that negotiation should continue and that every effort

should be made to settle the strike peacefully. That night, Mr. Johnson and some of his associates made another effort to recruit supporters in the dorm—in the Quadrangle area but that time there was virtually no response to his appeal. He had hardly a corporal's guard to join him.

All along, one of the reasons that the strikers and their allies were applying pressure as they did was due to the fact that spring vacation was scheduled to begin on Wednesday, April 2nd. Many of the strikers believed that Slater was stalling until spring holidays, because the company believed that it could break the strike more easily than with no students on campus. Spring vacation did indeed begin, but it was that very evening that Slater, or ARA, and the workers did reach agreement. The settlement was somewhat different from that that had been adopted at A&T, but it seemed to satisfy the workers. In fact, there has never been a strike since that time, nor did the workers maintain any kind of union organization following that time. Within six months, ARA had pulled out of its contract with A&T State University and that school has had a succession of caterers over the years since then. To this day, ARA is the caterer for the food service at UNCG.

Let me say that I have always had great respect for the ingenuity shown by Miss Bryant and her associates in Student Government in defusing the meeting in Elliott Hall [Elliott University Center] by announcing that there was to be convocation. Actually, the convocation did contribute a great deal to the solution. There were people—there were administrators and one campus minister, at least one campus minister, who played a part in advising the students. One such person was Miss Katherine Taylor who was dean of student services at that time. She stayed with the group all through the night of crisis. She advised Miss Bryant and other Student Government Association leaders.

And Mr. James Allen was then the Presbyterian campus minister. He had been on this campus for less than nine months at that time. He played a very influential role in giving guidance to the students. At least the accounts that have been given to me about the events in Elliott University Center have placed great emphasis on the contributions of these people. [unclear] a special faculty council meeting was held in the course of these events and the advice of faculty concerning the crisis was very valuable indeed. It was especially helpful to have the communication of faculty with students in such a way as to create better communication within the entire university community. Let me change that last sentence to say that it was especially

true that the faculty contributed to good communication throughout the university community by their conversations with students.

As I have indicated, the march on the Chancellor's House did not occur on that night of March 31st, 1969. There were other occasions later when disputes between student groups and the student senate produced special appeals by students who had an interest in a particular position of the Neo-Black Society on two different occasions and then on another occasion some students who were supporting the idea of twenty-four hour visitation. I should say that there were other occasions when those issues caused delegations of students to come to pay nocturnal visits me at the Chancellor's House. Most of these occurred after midnight and we mutually entered into conversations that helped to establish what the issues were. And then we set up plans for committee meetings the following day to make—to initiate a study of the issues and propose solutions.

Of course, there was one instant in which I was disturbed at 12:30 a.m. or a little later by an individual student who was irate over having had his car towed by the campus police. I knew the student well. He was a graduate student, in fact, a doctoral candidate. I learned that he had ignored some seven or eight parking tickets that he had received earlier and the campus police, once they had identified his car close to the [Jackson] Library that particular night, had it towed. The man's specialty was in counseling and guidance. I drove him home—he had a sick child, he told me—and over the course of that drive asked him if, as a specialist in counseling and guidance, he had a special insight into how a problem of this sort should be handled. He agreed by the time we got to his apartment that he had been wrong in ignoring the parking citations that he had received. That is the end of this recording.

[End of Statement]