WUAG-FM ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

INTERVIEWEE: James Sharbrough Ferguson

INTERVIEWER: Richard Griffiths

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RG: How old are your children now? You've got two girls, don't you?

JF: That's right. My older daughter is twenty-nine, and my younger, twenty-seven.

RG: One of them is living in Greensboro?

JF: The younger is living in Greensboro, and the older is teaching at Johns Hopkins in Baltimore within about a week or two weeks is going to return to your homeland. She's going to spend about six weeks in England working on a project.

RG: Does she have a doctorate?

JF: Yes. Did her graduate work at Yale [University, New Haven, Connecticut], undergraduate at Wellesley [College, Wellesley, Massachusetts]. My younger daughter is in library science, and did both her bachelor's work and her master's here. [She] works in public library part-time at the present time.

RG: Did you find it was sometimes embarrassing to have your daughter at the same school which you were a chancellor? Did she find it that way?

JF: Well, she was the one who made the choice, certainly. And I saw her so infrequently that it was a little difficult to face that question. But she, herself, attempted during the time to avoid identification with the administration, let's say. But I think she enjoyed being here.

RG: What do you enjoy most about your job?

JF: Well, there's great diversity in it. And it's a little difficult to select the segments that are the most, one more interesting than another. But I would certainly say the association with people, and students, of course, are ones whom I see quite often, not as often as I would like. And, then, of course, the association with faculty and administrators.

RG: You say you would like to see more students more. Would you like to return to teaching at some point?

JF: Well, that has been something of a romantic ideal in my life for a long time. I've been away from teaching now for ten years. And, so, to say that I'm closely identified with it

would mean that I would have to put it in terms of memory. From the time that I became chancellor I hoped to work it out so that I might teach at least one class a year that is, every other semester. But so far I haven't been able to do that.

RG: Your concentration is history, isn't it?

JF: History, that's right. Southern history at that.

RG: Southern history.

JF: Yes.

RG: What part has UNCG [The University of North Carolina at Greensboro, Greensboro, North Carolina] taken—what kind of role has UNCG taken in Southern history and history as a whole?

JF: Well, we have a very fine history department, one of the finest to be founded in the South. I will not dwell on the individuals who are in it, but from the standpoint of teaching effectiveness, and productivity in research and writing, it is one of the foremost departments. Dr. Richard [N.] Current, the year before last, was the president of the Southern Historical Association, and he has been a leader in the Organization for American Historians and the American Historical Association, too. So, have Dr. [Richard] Bardolph, Dr. Allen [W.] Trelease, Dr. Robert Calhoun, and many others whom I might mention.

RG: As a school as the whole, what kind of impact has UNCG had in the South?

JF: Well, I think that it's had a substantial impact. We know, of course, about its different eras of history. That long period when it was a woman's college and, especially, from 1931 to 1963 when it was the Woman's College of the University of North Carolina. It had a well-established reputation. And at—in the latter part of that period it drew students from all over the South. It still does. But a lower percentage of students are out of state now than were at that time. My first association with the school was during the time that I was in graduate school at [the University of North Carolina at] Chapel Hill. As a matter of fact, I was offered a job here just as I was finishing my graduate work but had already accepted one at my undergraduate school in Mississippi. So, I was there for eighteen-and-a-half years between that time and the time in 1962 when I came here as dean of the graduate school.

RG: You say that UNCG had a very good reputation when it was Woman's College, and I think in the minds of students, at least, that reputation has slipped in the last few years. We're the fourth largest institution in the state. Yet, many people give us little attention. What do you see as a potential solution to that, or why do you think that is? And that's a double-barreled question.

RG: Well, I would question whether the reputation has slipped. The institution does have its role and function defined somewhat differently. And we're still in the early stages of making our role and function effective. But if one measures the quality of the institution by the usual standards, and compares it to the period of the Woman's College when you say that our reputation was greater than it is now, in practically every item, the greater strength is to be found now. This would be in the quality of the faculty, as measured by the percentage of PhDs, the variety of offerings, the range of the entire university, the holdings of the library, [and] the equipment in the laboratories. As I say, if you look at virtually all of the criteria that is used in measuring the strength of an institution, then we certainly are in a much stronger position today than we were in the 1940s and '50s.

RG: You've seen UNCG change from Woman's College. Have the students changed a great deal in their attitudes, or are they basically the same?

JF: Well, yes, students have changed. I think they have changed here, and they've changed throughout society. Now, in what ways? Perhaps—well, certainly there is a greater degree of independence on the part of individual students. We've heard about the period of the 1950s as being as those being of apathy, 1960s of great activism, 1970s as individualism, separatism almost. I think that this campus reflects some of those characteristics that one finds in society as a whole. But I still find students anxious to satisfy scholarly curiosities, let's say, and to secure the enrichment of life that can be provided through their study here. I wouldn't limit it to study, of course.

Vice Chancellor [James H.] Allen talks a great deal about the core curriculum, the experience that one has outside the classroom, and with great validity. The different experiences that are available to a person are numerous, indeed, and certainly a percentage of students. I wouldn't venture to select the exact percentage, but a part of our students do look to these out-of-class activities as being special opportunities for the enrichment of their education. But this has been true in all ages. Simply have some variations in degree.

RG: Variation in theme, perhaps. Were you involved in extracurricular activities yourself?

JF: Yes, I'm afraid there were times as an undergraduate I could have been accused of piling activity on top of activity and sometimes without too much defined purpose. But I do value the kinds of activities I was able to engage in as an undergraduate. Debating, for instance, I had a great interest in this, and extensive experience. I can't claim many trophies won, though. As a matter of fact our debating teams on this campus have certainly performed at a much higher level than I did when I was an undergraduate. Of course, I had some colleagues a year or two later won some national championships. But—well, that's an example of the kind of activity I was engaged in. Intramural sports, manager of varsity baseball. But manager was really a glorified pigtail, you know, taking care of balls and bats and a few things of that nature.

RG: Do you follow softball on campus in between the dorms and—?

JF: Excuse me?

RG: Do you follow the softball games on campus?

JF: I've seen a few here, but not nearly as many as I would like to see. I get so tied up in the red tape of the office that I don't get out on campus as I would like to do.

RG: Did you participate in student government when you were in university as an undergrad?

JF: Yes, student government on my undergraduate campus was less elaborate than here. But, then, of course—well, that school today has 1,000 students. When I was in school it had 400. We had a student executive board, and I was one of fifteen members of that. And, yes, we allocated some student activity fees in the same way that organization, student organization fees are allocated here. And I, sometimes when I have read about the debates over allocation of fees, I—it's been reminiscent of some experiences that I had back there then.

RG: Has it changed? Has student government, you think, changed over the years as students have changed? Or do you think basic philosophies are still the same?

JF: Well, yes, it has changed. Well, student governments are more a more substantial part of the scene if I may put it that way on nearly every campus today than they were in my student days. The—we did not spend as much time in such activities as the typical student senator does today. I—whether we identified, quote, the issues, unquote, as clearly, it would be difficult for me to judge. But well I'll just sum it up by saying that student governments are more active today than in that earlier era. But, of course, we're talking about three decades ago, a little bit more than three decades ago.

RG: Do you think the war in both Vietnam [cold-war era proxy war that occurred in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia from 1965 to 1975] and Korea [conflict between North and South Korea from 1950 to 1953] and World War II [global war that occurred from 1939 to 1945] had an effect on the students and student government and that type of thing?

JF: Yes, I certainly one of the most traumatic and devastating experiences that this country has had has been the—has been that in Vietnam. And much of this was due to the inability of the people who participated in it to define some goals, some purposes of that—they themselves could respect. And regardless of the level at which one is doing his work, he does have to find some meaning if he is putting his entire soul and body into it. I, of course, am saying in a sense that the nation failed egregiously in the intervention in Southeast Asia, and the fact that young people were thrown into turmoil over this is more a reflection of their moral sensitivity than of any reluctance to participate in the prosecution of the nation's welfare. I—yes, that experience has affected young people, and certainly students, a great deal. I don't think that it's—it will destroy idealism forever. I see evidences that young people have been able to put this into perspective.

You know, one of the greatest differences between student activism in my day and student activism today is that young people, I think, recognize the greater complexities of human society than we did. Ours was a very optimistic era in spite of its being a [Great] Depression era [severe worldwide economic depression from 1929 to the

late 1930s], because we thought if you simply got enough good minds to work, and got them to cooperate in undertaking to realize a given objectives that—well, these things were bound to come to pass. And maybe Utopia was not around the corner, but two more corners, and it would be there. And, yes, we were naïve in many respects. Some—there's some oversimplification on the part of students today. But, on the other hand, I think there's less oversimplification than in the earlier eras. So, I do believe that eventually young people are going to have—well, I think their moorings are already reestablished to a greater degree than they were in the 1960s. And as far as their idealism is concerned, more power to them.

RG: UNCG is going to change in the future, I'm sure. Every school in this country will change a little bit in the future, how would you like to see it move? How would you like to see it grow?

JF: Well, of course, what exists in the general society has a great effect on what this institution is to be. And one reason that there has been such a change in the institution from 1963 to the present is that society needed places for great many more young people to have the university experience. And this was true for both the undergraduate and graduate levels. The Carlisle Commission that made a study of the needs of North Carolina for education beyond high school saw in this institution a good base for the development of another comprehensive university.

And, so, we were asked to redefine our role and function and to become a larger institution, a coeducational institution, one with expanded graduate and professional offerings, and, also, a school that would relate to the urban area in which we are located. Now, we have not reached the limits of the growth that was pressed upon us essentially by society in that era. But we have certainly come to a lessening of the pressure of growth and, perhaps, within four or five years we'll reach a point at which we will be virtually static in enrollment. Our situation is somewhat different from that of other schools in the nation because of our location. But we do not anticipate any great growth after 1982 for at least a decade and perhaps even longer.

Now, that, of course, is going to mean that the developmental aspects of the school will be different than they have been. Now, we trust that in that era we shan't lack progress. As a matter of fact, the strengthening of programs that we already have, the introduction of additional programs that will be—that will be needed, and society will demonstrate as being needed, these will mark the development of the 1980s. When it comes to physical facilities we certainly need more than we have now to serve the number of students that we currently have. So, yes, there will be a need for additional capital improvements.

As far as the basic philosophy of the institution is concerned, I do see it continuing as one emphasizing the value of the liberal arts in the education of all people who study at the college and university level. And the professional specializations will be provided. But they will be built on the base of the liberal arts. We do hope that students have here the opportunity for the development of broad intellectual understanding. And the liberal arts in general provides such opportunities. But every man or woman who wishes to be well-educated must command a special discipline, a special skill, a vocation

or profession, and we, of course, are seeking to develop the resources that will enable people to develop such skills and knowledge.

RG: What is your philosophy of education?

JF: Well, in a sense I have just stated it.

RG: Yes.

JF: But I think that we start out with the individual. And a college or university cannot take every individual regardless of the status of his development and say, "Well, we'll take you from this point to the highest level of accomplishment that you're capable of achieving." We do this to some degree, but on the other hand we do not, again, with illiterates. At least we propose to build on the educational experience that one has developed through the secondary schools. But it's still true that what happens to the individual is of the greatest importance. Now, the individual is part of a society. And the needs of society must be served.

If the individual is to be an effective member of the society, he is going to need to understand himself, the social world of which he is a part, and, certainly, the physical world of which he is a part. So, the curriculum is designed to increase such understanding. We, as to the methods that are most effective in this, well, we believe that the assembling of experts, the faculty members who can give special guidance, provide special knowledge are of fundamental importance in the development of the individual student. But the response of the individual and his motivation are very important elements in what kind of education he or she receives.

The library, the laboratories, the faculty members, all of these are here to facilitate individual growth. And if we, as a university, do our jobs right, then we will get responsiveness. But that's the test: The degree to which the individual student goes through intellectual growth and development. And I'll add, emotional maturity, because the dimensions of human personality go far beyond knowledge and skills. We speak of wisdom and understanding and don't always have wisdom clearly defined, but judgment. But the comprehensive understanding that would enable one to make judgments on the basis of reliable values. That's part of the dimension of wisdom.

RG: Does your job have a big impact on your family life?

JF: Well, it does have some impact on family life. A chancellor's wife is part of the total picture, too. And it so happens that my wife is one who has great intellectual interests, and, well, the day we hit campus she enrolled as an auditor in a course in anthropology. And, so, she sees in the university community a wonderful opportunity to explore her own intellectual interests. And, then, there are many social functions that involve the larger university community as well as the on-campus group. And she participates in this and enjoys it. You asked me earlier about whether my younger daughter—

RG: Excuse me a second. Let me see if I can fix that machine. [tape recorder is making squeaking sound] Before we were so rudely interrupted.

JF: You asked me earlier about my younger daughter's being on campus and whether she felt any identification with my particular position and responsibility. And I said that she did seek to establish a certain amount of anonymity, because for one thing she—well, I don't know what she thought would result from loss of anonymity. The—my schedule, of course, is a quite full schedule. And it so happened that I became chancellor when my younger daughter was in senior high school. And my older daughter was already in undergraduate school so that the impact on my children was not the same as it would be if I had become chancellor while they were in grammar school. I don't feel that my family life really has been eschewed very much by my experiences as chancellor. But, of course, this is a very important question that persons must ask throughout life. And the sacrificing of family is not justifiable. But, then, the variety of experiences that will bring the ideal development of persons is obvious and differ so much from one person to another that it's a little bit hard to know what that combination is that you need.

RG: Well, that just about sums it up. Do you have anything else that you would like to add?

JF: Well, I am glad to have this opportunity to talk with you. The type of communication that is possible through the student newspaper and the radio station is quite important. And the—and to have the opportunity to know more about the life of the campus as a whole through these media is worth a great deal. And I appreciate this opportunity to participate in it.

RG: Thank you a lot. I really do appreciate it.

[End of Interview]