UNCG in the 1960s Oral History Collection

INTERVIEWEE: Allen W. Trelease

INTERVIEWER: Natalie E. Davis

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ND: Okay, I am here with Allen W. Trelease, author of *Making North Carolina Literate* and professor at UNCG [The University of North Carolina at Greensboro] from 1967 to1994. We are going to talk about his time as a professor during the ’60s and then go on to talk about his book, and today is August, I mean October 2nd of 2006. Tell me about, just some background information about yourself.

AT: Well, I went to the University of Illinois, undergraduate and master’s degree, and then I got my doctorate at Harvard in 1955. My first job was at Wells College in upstate New York, a small woman's college. I taught there from 1955 until 1967, and I rose up through the ranks starting as instructor and ending up as professor. Then I came to UNCG in 1967 in order to teach Southern History primarily. Chancellor James Ferguson, who was chancellor at UNCG at that time, was teaching Southern History and he found that he was simply having trouble meeting his classes on a regular basis because of his responsibilities as chancellor. So they hired me to come down and teach Southern History as well as sections of the United States History survey and anything else that seemed mutually agreeable between me and the department. I suppose I qualified in some respects for this job because I had begun work on a history of the Ku Klux Klan in the South during Reconstruction, so I had gotten into Southern history though it had not been a major specialty up north where I was. I was hired largely through the instrumentality of Professor Richard Current who was in the history department at UNCG and had formerly been at the University of Illinois, and I was a student of his when I was there as a master’s student 1950 to ’51. So I am sure he was the primary motivator in getting me hired. The head of the department at that time, who did the actual hiring, was Richard Bardolph who was long-time head of the history department, and died just a year or so ago, at ninety or ninety-one. So that is how I got here.

ND: Now, what would you say about your initial experience during ’67—’69 as far as, just, when you first came here what did you think of the campus? How was it different than Wells College?

AT: It was bigger than Wells College but it was primarily female just as Wells [College] had been completely female. We became coeducational at UNCG only in 1963 and actually the first undergraduate male students came in ’64, so I came just three years after that and the number of male students was quite small so that was not a big change. There was something of a change just moving to the South. The most overt cases of racial segregation were gone but there was still a lot of the backwash of that. Not so bad in Greensboro as it

was in other places but it took a little getting used to just to live in the South. But since I had studied the South, I mean, I was not a stranger to this. I was not shocked by anything I saw in fact; I think I was more pleasantly surprised than otherwise by the sort of racial climate that I found at the university and in Greensboro generally. What else do you have in mind there maybe?

ND: I have a couple other questions to that.

AT: Well, wait a minute.

ND: Okay.

AT: A couple of other things. Even though UNCG was not as big as it is now it was a good deal bigger than Wells College so I had the feeling I was coming to a bigger campus, I was, and with more bureaucracy as a result. And so that took a little getting used to but there was no culture shock really.

ND: How was the faculty different? Was it a much larger faculty than you were used to?

AT: Yeah, the faculty was larger, the department was larger. I do not remember the exact number of people in the history department, there may have been twenty at that time, whereas at Wells College there were four of us in a joint history and political science department. Actually, political science was part of the history department at UNCG when I came. They separated about 1970. So there were at least two political scientists in the department. Yeah, it was a bigger—bigger department, more specialization possible than was true when there are only three of you who are historians up there at Wells. And that was one of the reasons I came, in order to be able to specialize a little more in my own field of interest. Up at Wells, I was teaching every year a section of Modern European History, which is fine when you are starting, it is a good thing to have in your background, but if you are an American Historian it becomes increasingly a major diversion.

ND: Now, what initially do you remember—like let's say your first year or two here, do you remember what classes you mostly taught your first couple of years here?

AT: I think the whole time I taught here I was teaching a section of United States History surveys fall and spring, and then I taught a couple advanced courses each semester. To begin with and, well, through most of the time I was here it included Southern History because that was the primary thing I was brought here to teach, but when Professor Current retired then I inherited the Civil War and Reconstruction class that he had taught and so I continued to teach that until I retired. Occasionally I would teach a course on the Jackson period that I had sort of invented up at Wells College and brought down with me. I passed that on to other people after a while but I taught that once or twice. Then I was teaching a graduate seminar, I taught sometimes a historiography class, I mean a history of historical writing starting with Herodotus and moving up to relatively modern times. I taught that as a graduate course a number of times.

ND: Would you say universally your favorite to teach would be the Southern [History]?

AT: Southern and Civil War Reconstruction. Yes. I would say particularly the Civil War Reconstruction.

ND: Now, you spoke a little bit before about how coeducation had just occurred in 1963. When you came you said there were still relatively few men. Were there any tensions left over would you say or did everybody—

AT: No. No, I saw no evidence of tensions, no, none at all. I read about a little bit at the very beginning before I got there but I certainly never saw any of that. And of course right on down until the time I retired or today for that matter, the enrollment is still two-thirds female. It was never any more than that, never any more than one-third male the whole time I was there, and so it did not take very long before the number of males got up to that level and then sort of leveled off.

ND: What would you say, of those that were male at that time, what percentage would you venture to guess were African American males at that time? Very, very few?

AT: Very few but that would be true of females as well. I don't make any distinction between male and female there. The number of African American students was fairly small; it got a little bit bigger as time went on. I mean, by the time I retired the total enrollment at UNCG was close to eighteen—seventeen, eighteen percent black I believe, and that was reflected in my classes to some degree. Yeah, but that gradually increased over the years.

ND: Now, there was a lot, obviously, going on in the first couple of years that you were there—Vietnam [War], there was a lot of, you know, civil rights—do you recall specifically any goings on that you saw?

AT: Demonstrations occasionally on campus—particularly over the bombing of Cambodia. There was a strong student move toward a moratorium on classes at one point. I write about that in the book and my recollections in the book are going to be better than they are in my mind right now. Yeah, there were some demonstrations, students were demonstrating down on Tate Street against businesses there that would not allow blacks to come in and I wasn't personally involved in that very much but it was going on and I knew about it.

ND: Did you ever experience—I mean did live discussions during class ever occur during some of the most tense times?

AT: Yes, yes. Sometimes we went out of our way; faculty members went out of our way to bring this kind of thing up so as to evoke some discussion. It didn't dominate our curriculum or anything like that but, yes, it was going on around us and we took notice of it.

ND: Do you remember in particular the Dining Hall Workers' Strike in 1969?

AT: I do, yes, yes. Again, what I know of it now is much greater than what I knew at the time

because I have researched it for the book [*Making North Carolina Literate*]. But I was aware of it at the time and was aware in a general way of the pressures on students, on the workers, on Chancellor Ferguson, on Vice-Chancellor Jim Allen, Vice-Chancellor for student affairs. I know much more about that now than I did then, but again, we were aware that these things were going on.

ND: And was there—now that particular event, in your book I read that the students actually went to, well, they called Chancellor Ferguson at night after the huge—

AT: Came and knocked on his door.

ND: [laughs]

AT: [laughs] Yeah.

ND: So I imagine—was that a very tense couple of days in there? I believe it—

AT: It was tense for the people that were involved but for those of us on the faculty who weren't directly involved, we only knew about part of this. It wasn't all evident. Much of what I know now I know because of reading the chancellor's papers, reading the oral history recollections of people who were much more directly involved in it than I was. So, we—we—most of us were sort of generally aware of what was happening but not about the details. One of the great privileges of writing this history was, I got to learn a lot more about these things later on than I did at the time.

ND: Would you say then that is a good indication of the fact that—I know you eluded in the book somewhat to that the students were relatively—it was mostly peaceful demonstrations and that it was not—there wasn't the violence that occurred on other campuses and things like that.

AT: True.

ND: So would you say that the fact that the faculty was only generally aware of these, would you say that that is also an indication that—

AT: Things were relatively peaceful?

ND: Yes.

AT: Yes, yes, that is true. We were reading in the newspaper what was going on at [University of California,] Berkeley, Columbia [University], Harvard [University] where the sit-ins were much more massive than they were here. We had only one sit-in really. It was at the Foust Building, the then administration building, and it was quite peaceful. Most of what I know about that I learned later on. I knew just in a general way it had taken place at that time. And so it was with most of these things. If you are a working member of the faculty, involved primarily in teaching your classes, doing the research that you are doing, you are

not necessarily plugged into what the students are doing on some other part of the campus, except in the most general way. There were, of course, some faculty members who did involve themselves much more immediately in these kinds of activities. And I have a lot of admiration for some of those people, but I was not particularly involved.

ND: There was a lot of construction going on then as it seems like there always is on campus. Do you remember—I know for one, the construction of the Nursing Building, I believe there was a couple of the dormitories, a couple new dormitories during the middle of the sixties were erected—do you remember if—was it just business as usual—I mean, was it enough to make maneuvering around campus difficult or anything like that?

AT: Well, if it was it was something we adjusted to. Parking was always a problem. [laughs] I think parking is probably less of a problem now than it was twenty years ago—and certainly the neighbors were troubled by the parking because students—you know, we were in the ’60s and ’70s particularly the ’70s and ’80s we were becoming a commuter campus and students were coming in their cars. There wasn’t adequate campus parking. They were parking in front of houses; they were parking in people’s yards, they were blocking driveways and there was a real town-gown friction that took place because of that. Faculty members faced the same problem of finding parking places. Well, until the very time I retired, you would learn what parking lots would fill up at what hour and so you would guide your arrival on campus somewhat by where you thought you could find a parking place. It is probably still true today. [both chuckle]

ND: It is still the same, very much. I find that especially as a commuter. [laughs] What would you say—now this is kind of going to span some years—but what would you say the difference in students was over the span of your career at UNCG? Did the students really change, as far as maybe I don’t want to say respect but the way that they treated their professors? Was there any change over time or did you always feel that—I mean, did college as an institution or public university, do you feel like it changed during those years?

AT: Not dramatically but you could see changes, slight changes, up and down as time went by. There were times when, you can match this with records from the admissions office, when admission standards would go down and you would get people in the freshman and sophomore classes that were clearly less well prepared than had been true previously. Then, faculty members would criticize this condition and they would raise the admissions levels again. There is always a sort of contest going on because the legislature appropriates money to the University based on enrollment, and so there is an advantage—monetary advantage—to admitting as many people as you can. But if you admit a lot of people who really are not ready to be in college, the faculty will rebel over this. I am making this a little more dramatic than it was but still, I noticed that there were some of these ups and downs as time went on, particularly in about 1991, 1992.

Shortly before I retired there was a time when a bunch of people were being admitted and I was getting students in the freshman and sophomore classes that were really not up to the levels that I had had before, but that reversed itself because they upped the admissions standards. I would say this as a generalization throughout the time I was here,

that the upper level classes, students—juniors, seniors, graduate students—were just as good as any students I had at Wells College, which was a private institution with higher admission standards to begin with. But at the freshman and sophomore level you got a much broader mix of people including quite a few who didn't last very long. That is the kind of thing that changed a little bit up and down as time went by, but it was always true to some degree. We were getting freshman and sophomores that were not up to the standards I had known up at Wells. That was always true to some degree but it varied somewhat from year to year. The upper level classes were always a pleasure to teach and I would say, and I think every faculty member would agree, that we really treasured most the older students who were paying their own way, knew why they were there, had had some life experiences, were better able and more willing to participate in class discussion, and really contributed a lot more to the class than a lot of the eighteen-year-olds did. But there is also the fact that as I aged myself I probably was less able to communicate with eighteen-year-olds than I had been earlier. [chuckling] So there's some of both those things there.

ND: Now, do you recall—I know we have talked a little bit about African American students on campus—and do you recall the Neo-Black Society?

AT: I do, yes.

ND: And also the evening when Dr. Martin Luther King [Jr.] was assassinated. I believe some of the students went to the Chancellor's House again on that evening as well. Do you remember—what did you sense, was there anything on campus around that or did you ever notice racial tensions during that time between the white students and the black students, or even some faculty?

AT: No. Most of the tension, racial tension among students, I didn't know about then, I learned about later by reading the records, you know, doing research for this book. I did not see that kind of thing in the classrooms. But demonstrations—Black students' anger at the assassination of Martin Luther King, sure, saw that, but we were reading it in the newspaper all over the United States at the same time. So there was nothing extraordinary about what was going on locally. It was just the local version of what was happening everywhere in the United States, and again all these problems tended to be more muted here than they were in other places that you read about or saw on television.

ND: Do you remember—well, there was also one more issue related to that that I found really interesting, when in 1969 I believe there was some racial violence at A&T [North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University, Greensboro, North Carolina] but that Black students at UNCG were allowed to go home for a week or two, I believe?

AT: Yeah, again I know more about that last part now than I did then, but I think I was vaguely aware. I did not have enough black students that that would have been a big factor, but there may have been one or two who did not come to class briefly. My memory about that is primarily a personal one that has nothing to do with the university. My wife and I were building a house in the north side of Greensboro at that time and the architect who was

designing the house was African American. His office was on the east side of Greensboro and so I was driving past A&T, or hoping to drive past A&T, to get to his office for some sort of consultation about the house, and saw that East Market Street had been blocked off. I didn't really know the reason for it at that point but I turned to the left on another street and then as soon as I could I turned right again hoping to get back down to Market where I could—after the obstruction, whatever it was, was behind me. I ran into a mob of A&T students on both sides of the street hurling bricks and stones at the cars that were going through and I was sort of propelled into the middle as I was driving behind a big truck so I couldn't see much in front of me. The truck drove off, took a left turn on some little side street, and there I was facing this mob of students throwing bricks at me. It was May and my windows of the car were down and so I just sort of gunned it, held my head down and shot through this gauntlet as fast as I could, and missed hitting students very narrowly. The windshield was smashed and later on I discovered there was a brick on the floor of the right hand side of the car with a big dent on the inside of the door, the trim there. Apparently this thing had gone through the window by my head, over my head while I was ducking down, hit the door and then fell to the floor of the car. Well, I managed to get out of that unscathed except for a lot of powdered glass in my hair, and pulled into the automobile dealer. It happened that I was driving an Opel Kadett, a little car of that vintage, and the Opel dealer was also the Buick dealer there on Murrow Boulevard and Lindsay Street, and so just a few blocks from where this happened. So I pulled in there and got myself straightened out and got the car straightened out—but that was in May of 1969, I remember that vividly. There was not, at least as far as I know, a lot of reverberation of that at UNCG. There may have been some but I wasn't aware of it. My own personal situation was a lot more important to me at that point. [chuckles] Yeah, that was in May 1969.

ND: Well, in closing on this, we will go to the researching of the book in just a minute. It sounds like your experience lends to a lot of the research you have done in that even though UNCG has a very varied past—as far as going from women's to desegregation and coeducation, and also being in the same town as the civil rights [1960 Greensboro] Sit-ins at Woolworth's and things like that, and being a large city in the South—basically the student body kept its head, I guess, and things remained peaceful.

AT: Yes.

ND: For the most part, even through all these things, would you say that—

AT: Yes. I think that is true, yes, and we had a student body, as I think we do now that is not heavily politicized. It may be that most campuses are not heavily politicized as far as most students are concerned but at Berkeley for instance, or Columbia, or Harvard, there is going to be a large vocal minority of people who are heavily motivated one way or the other and make their presence known. At a place like UNCG, which draws its students largely from the area and which is a metropolitan university, you are not going to get a very large number of students who are very political. At least I haven't seen them in the years I have been here. It is an advantage sometimes; it is a disadvantage other times. Sometimes you wish there were a little more yeast in the student body, but when it comes

to throwing brick bats you are glad that there is not a lot of it.

ND: Is there anything else that you would like to add about your time as a professor in the ’60s or after that—anything you can add about the University as a whole?

AT: Well, we were always conscious of its getting bigger and bigger and as a faculty member I was always impressed by how much bigger the administration got and how lavish their quarters were compared with the quarters that most of the rest of us had. This is true at most campuses, I think. There was in the ’70s—in the ’60s, ’70s, and ’80s a very real sense that we were under-funded compared with other campuses, and that much of the funding we did get was siphoned upstairs to the administration. Some of this may have been unfair but I think most of it was fair. It was a correct perception.

[Chancellor] Jim Ferguson was primarily interested in building up the academic standing of the University and I think he did a very, very good job, but his funds were limited and the physical structure, the infrastructure of the campus suffered. It was shabby. The buildings were often shabby, the grounds were shabby and it was something that you were just a little bit ashamed of. At the same time that the quality of the faculty we thought was very good and was getting better all the time. We were aided by the fact that nationwide there was a hirer's market for faculty; a lot more bright people coming out of graduate schools with PhDs looking for jobs than there were good jobs for them. And so all universities tended to upgrade their faculties just by virtue of the fact that there were so many good people out there looking for jobs compared with the number of jobs available. We participated in that and we were quite aware of it all the time that was going on. I think that in the nineties, well, under Chancellor [William] Moran, and he came in 1979, so in the ’80s and onward he did a lot to build up the infrastructure and make the place less shabby. I think he deserves a lot of credit for that. He was not the most popular chancellor from the stand point of the faculty for a number of reasons, but I think that he generally gets credit and deserves credit for making the place more attractive to look at and live in, without suffering, particularly academically, I don’t think we went downhill academically while this was happening.

ND: Now, I would like to shift towards the book *Making North Carolina Literate* as well as your pictorial history of UNCG, *Changing Assignments.* I guess to start off—when you had the idea where did you first go, I guess, to—where did you start your research?

AT: Almost everything was done at the University Archives, just in the nature of things. The pictorial book, *Changing Assignments,* came first. Almost all—I don’t think this is over generalizing—the great majority of university histories around the country come when there is a big anniversary, centennial, or whatever. I know East Carolina [University, Greenville, North Carolina] went through this, North Carolina State [University, Raleigh, North Carolina] had one, and that is general around the country. So, we had our centennial in 1992 and I was asked to do this pictorial history at that time. I was able, in the archives and a little bit elsewhere to get together pictures for it. That took—I think it took me a summer and perhaps the academic year following while I was still teaching full-time. It was not a massive project by any means. Besides the archives I can remember going down to Duke Power Company headquarters in Charlotte, [North Carolina] because they

had inherited photographs of street scenes around Woman's College in the 1920s and 1930s that had belonged to Duke Power's predecessor, which not only was the electricity company for Greensboro but ran the streetcars. And so there were a lot of street scenes; Tate Street, Spring Garden Street, and so on.

So I made a trip down to Charlotte and got some of those things. I think I probably got some others elsewhere but the vast majority came from the University Archives. And then the *Making North Carolina Literate* virtually all of that material came from the University Archives. My vote for the most valuable source, just as a category, was the chancellor's papers because virtually everything of importance that goes on campus, some information about that, reflection of it passes the chancellor's desk. Whether it is student affairs, whether it is academic affairs, whether it is relations with the University Administration at Chapel Hill, whatever. It is apt to be reflected in the chancellor's papers. Now I did not limit myself to that. I looked at the Vice-Chancellor for Student Affairs papers and to some degree the dean of the various colleges and the various professional schools. I got information there; I got information from student government records, but the chancellor's papers, far and away the most important. When it comes to student affairs I also went through *The Carolinian*, the student newspaper, from the first issue page after page. A little of it was on microfilm but basically page after page, which is what you prefer. Microfilm is a lot better than nothing but it isn't as good as seeing the real thing. I got a lot from *The Carolinian.*

Away from UNCG I visited the University of North Carolina Archives at Chapel Hill—they're housed with the Southern Historical Collection in the Wilson Library there—I got some things there. For published materials, whatever we didn't have here I could often find at the North Carolina Collection which is also in the Wilson Library. I guess I found a little bit at Duke University—manuscripts—and probably a few other places but again the vast majority of what was relevant to the subject was in the UNCG Archives, which is a tremendous, just tremendous resource because very little is missing. The chancellor's papers are complete from [President Charles Duncan] McIver right on down to the most recent years except for one year, I think it was 1931 during the Depression, when for some reason that one year is missing. Nobody knows, Betty Carter, the [University] Archivist doesn't know. Nobody knows any longer why it was missing. But that is a great source. The chancellor's papers and the other things are relatively full too; other office records from around the campus, and Student Affairs, and *The Carolinian.*

ND: About how long—you said the other one took you about the summer and a little bit longer to collect the pictures.

AT: This took about ten or eleven years.

ND: Okay.

AT: They, we looked around for somebody to do this in addition to the pictorial history and I approached—I was chairman of the history committee of the Centennial Organization and I tried to recruit other people to come and to write a history of the university. I even tried to get the dean of [College of] Arts and Sciences to fund a visiting professorship for

somebody who could come in from the outside and do it, and to no avail. The dean was unwilling to allocate that much money for that purpose and so I couldn't persuade anyone else to do it. Dr. [Richard] Bardolph would not do it, Dr. [Richard] Current would not do it, and so I ended up doing it. I enjoyed it thoroughly but it did take a long time. I started doing it about 1992 while I was still working and then I was doing it essentially full-time after I retired in 1994, and virtually all of that, as I said, in the University Archives. I was a very familiar figure there. Yeah, so I spent years and years in there and then a couple years—two, three years writing it here at home or at my house where I lived then. It came out in 2003, I guess. [clears throat] I have been doing genealogy since.

ND: Now, it is very interesting in looking at this project that I am doing—basically other than the University Archives, your books are about all there is as far as published works about the university.

AT: Elizabeth Bowles did a doctoral dissertation back in 1967 that was a history of Woman's College [of the University of North Carolina] and I got some help from it. It was not as full as what I was doing but it was helpful.

ND: Would you say most colleges or most universities—would you say they have as few published sources, I guess, or is—

AT: They vary a lot. If you take Harvard, for instance, they had a really first rate historian, Samuel Elliot Morrison, who did a lot of things from Colonial Massachusetts to the Navy in World War II. But he wrote a massive history of Harvard, which he then condensed into a smaller volume. Harvard is well served. Then there are other histories of Harvard that have come out covering later periods. So Harvard is well served. My other alma-mater, the University of Illinois, has a quite good history that came out ten, fifteen years ago maybe by a faculty member there; probably stimulated by some sort of a centennial or anniversary of some kind. Chapel Hill has a number of histories. They tend not to be as full as this; they tend to be a little shorter and more popular. UNC Press brings these out from time to time. I noticed there was a new illustrated history of the Chapel Hill campus that is in press right now—the UNC Press. I have not seen it but there was one that came out in the eighties, Bill Powell from the history department over there did one and Bill Snyder who was a former editor of the *Greensboro Daily News*, the *News and Record*, wrote a history of the Chapel Hill campus. Then at the time of the NC State centennial there was one there. At the time of East Carolina's—well the centennial there would have been 1907? I think that was when it was founded.

ND: I believe so.

AT: So this could not have been the centennial because the book came out ten, fifteen years ago, but anyway there is one there that I thought was quite good. There is a good history of the University of Georgia. There is a very, very good history of Vanderbilt University which I tried to use as sort of a model—but it varies. Smaller colleges are less apt to have good histories than bigger ones, I guess for fairly obvious reasons; bigger population to draw on to do the work, maybe more money to finance it.

ND: [chuckles] Is there anything that you would like to touch on as far as the book or your experience at UNCG or anything that you would like to add?

AT: Well, the university was very good to me over the years and I am properly grateful for it. I hope I added to the university, it certainly added a lot to me. I enjoyed my time there. Retirement is good. [chuckles] I enjoyed teaching the classes; I never enjoyed grading the exams, and so one of the great luxuries in December and in May is knowing I don't have to read blue books. Term papers I did not mind because students were doing separate topics on their own topics so I was not reading the same thing over and over again, but I enjoyed it. It was a rewarding experience; the university is a good one. It's gotten better over the years. It has gotten certainly bigger over the years, and I am very grateful for the opportunities I have had there.

ND: Thank you very much.

[End of Interview]