

**GREENSBORO VOICES/GREENSBORO CIVIL RIGHTS ORAL HISTORY
COLLECTION**

INTERVIEWEE: John Forbis

INTERVIEWER: Mark Dorosin

DATE: February 15, 1988

[Begin Tape 1, Side A]

MARK DOROSIN: Ok, this is Mark Dorosin interviewing John Forbis. It's February 15, 1988. Okay, Mr. Forbis, why don't we just start with you telling me a little bit about your background, how long you've been in Greensboro, what have you been doing in Greensboro, that kind of thing.

JOHN FORBIS: I'm a native of Greensboro. My family's been here over three hundred years, for eleven generations worth. We at one time owned a large part of the county as a result of a land grant from King Charles of Great Britain. And since that time we managed to hang on to about twenty-eight acres. I guess I'm as "old Greensboro" as you can get. There's no family that I am aware that has been here longer or has a larger legacy within this community in my mind. Not many of us left, most of the natives been absorbed or moved on to other places in the country.

Greensboro's a very unique place. It never should have been here because we're not located on a river or any major rail head or water resource. Subsequently, it just sort of evolved in a clearing or open space in the forest, I might imagine. The subject of your piece here, the history of race relations and black-white circumstances in Greensboro, North Carolina, is something that I imagine, once you're elected to public office in Greensboro, you get used to going through about once every year. Everybody wants to know why Greensboro's relations are what they are or why they aren't what they should be.

And I can tell you a thing that reassures me that things are a lot better here than most places in this country. And that includes race relations as a whole. You will find Greensboro to be a very tolerant community. I don't think you'll find a community that has a larger Jewish presence that enjoys the relations on that side of the human relations quotient like Greensboro does, and quite honestly, if we've done, probably quit jumping from bush to bush and trying to make more out of something that isn't there, we'd probably have better black-white relations than we do.

I also learned--have come to understand Greensboro's place in history. If you want to make a statement in race relations, you don't go to Atlanta, you don't go to Baltimore, you don't go to Richmond. You go to Selma [Alabama], you go to Birmingham, you go to Greensboro, and you go to Memphis. You'll find towns who have been historically represented in civil rights progress and history; that's where you go to make your demonstration or make your statement. And Greensboro will always be a place, in my opinion, where the Klan comes to march, and where the black students at A&T [North Carolina A&T State University], and the other civil rights organizations decide to make their stand and make their pitch. That, from the historical presence, is where Greensboro pretty much has been since the sixties.

MD: As a native of Greensboro, maybe you can tell me, what are some of your earliest personal experiences of blacks and whites in Greensboro?

JF: You mean prior to being elected?

MD: Yes.

JF: Well, I had some very dear friends who were black, and I didn't know we had a racial problem, until I'd--if we do, as such. I didn't know we were having a problem quite as severe as everybody was telling me it was until I grew up, until I went to college. Of course I decided that I was going to be--I worked awfully hard at being different. You know, I didn't want to be mediocre or like everybody else--that was probably one of my burning desires when I was in college. Oh, I was going to change the world--everything's wrong, nothing's right; let's do it different.

MD: And, that's probably what led you into the political sphere?

JF: Oh no, I didn't get into politics until I had been out of college probably eleven or twelve years. And I really got into politics because first of all I joined the Jaycees when I got out of college. [phone rings] Not that I had any burning desire to be a boy scout, but there was really nothing else for someone in their early- to mid-twenties to join. I mean you could join the Kiwanis or the Civitan or the Rotary or something--eat, burp, and go home kind of organization--

MD: [Laughter]

JF: --and do some very polite things. Or you could join an organization that seemed to have some fire in its eye which led to some things happening around in the community, and I did. And at that time I was working about eighty to eighty-five hours a week here in my

business. For the first couple of years I really did not have much time to devote to that. And eventually I got to where the business--we could afford to hire somebody to wash cars and put up tents, which is what I did basically for a couple of years. And I had some time to devote to civic activities, and the Jaycees were very very strong and still are very very strong on community service and public involvement.

MD: What were some of the first projects you were involved with in the Jaycees?

JF: We poured coffee at the rest-stops on the highways, and we took the handicapped shopping at Christmas, we took poor children to the circus, the whole gamut of just sort of very nice little "what do you do for your fellow mankind" kind of projects, kite-flying contests for the kids who couldn't afford to buy kites. Then [I] got involved with the golf tournament and worked my way through that for about ten years and became chairman of that and then got out of that. Then ran for the secretary of the organization, got beat. And then decided that I needed to do something else, so I ran for council; there were three openings at the time.

MD: What year was this?

JF: [Nineteen] seventy-three. Seventy-two when I was running, seventy-three was the election.

MD: Now, about that point, that's when the mayor Carson Bain said that's when the schools first officially got desegregated totally. And I was wondering if you have any memories of that during the campaign or during that year?

JF: No, it was just, you know, most of the people in this area couldn't understand why they were being forced to bus. And they weren't in Hartford or New York or other communities up in the Ohio Valley were not participating. And that was the biggest--you know most people at that time felt that the South was being made to go to the whipping boy, while it was business as usual in the rest of the country. Nobody was busing in Watts, you know, and nobody was busing throughout the northeast, but the southeast and the "yellow bombs", you know, were crawling all over the place.

And I don't think anyone denied that it was not appropriate. I think that most people felt that it was not being equitably managed as a national priority. And, when they did try to do it right outside of Detroit, and in other places, in Boston, there was rioting, but the South went fairly calmly about the business of integrating its schools, which some would may say we had trouble to come, but I'm not sure you could say that.

MD: When you first sat on the [Greensboro City] Council in 1973, what were some of the

situations then? I believe, I'm not certain, that there was a housing problem in Greensboro or getting a loan for housing.

JF: No, what it was, we were talking about scattered-site housing. What we basically did was to move low-income housing projects into the more affluent neighborhoods. We didn't do it, it was not our doing, but the zoning that would require that kind of housing to be placed fell to the responsibility of the city council.

MD: Was there a lot of opposition to that?

JF: Oh sure. There were a lot of people who felt that they just didn't want to create slum conditions in their neighborhood.

MD: Then how did the council weather those kinds of criticisms?

JF: Well, we just weathered it. You put your head down and turn into the wind and move forward. But I don't know that it did anything other than create fifty units of housing which, you know, sort of isolated themselves from the rest of the community. You know, the mere presence of those units didn't evoke any great feelings of closeness or desire to become neighbors with the people that lived there. They sort of became insulated and isolated from the rest of the community that they were thrust into, which you know I've always said that human relations is best described as perhaps a state of the heart.

And you know, you can talk yourself blue in the face and make these great and glorious demands on the population to accept or to qualify people for acceptance, ultimately to turn somebody's heart, that switch--but until they're ready to be neighbors or friends of those people, it will not happen. You can legislate and rule on high, wherever, but it's not going to take place while there's resistance from one group toward another.

MD: A very good point. Um, now you sat on the council for how long?

JF: I was on the council for eight years. Two years as mayor pro tem, the vice mayor, and then as mayor for six years, and the war of the district system raged. And so what I did was to appoint a task force of which I was a participant, a primary participant for the first three or four meetings, and then turned them loose to examine the system where we could all come together and agree on. And I put people from both sides of the issue on the task force, those who were very strongly in favor of maintaining the at-large system and those who wished we would go to a district system.

Then after about six or seven months, they came forward with a recommendation. I went around to the business community and worked through the council, rather than put

it to a vote, which I felt it would have failed, we voted on it in our council and installed it.

MD: So--

JF: It was very easy.

MD: What was your personal position on the district [system] debate?

JF: Oh, you know, I've always felt that what we were dealing with was a perception. Anyone, regardless of their race or color, if Henry Frye could get elected, if they wanted to and worked at it hard enough and were willing to meet certain criteria for an elected official: flexibility, a willingness to compromise, work with people regardless of their station or lot in life. No different from any other white politician. Blacks vote for whites and whites vote for blacks.

Why's it so tough? Well, there's an attitude that seems to prevail among some black politicians that if you can raise enough hell you can get the people motivated, and lay enough rhetoric down, then all of a sudden, they can get elected. It doesn't work in basically, you know, the white community. It works in the black community; it's received fairly well. It doesn't get the kind of sympathetic ear that the white community, the majority community that you find--

And subsequently a lot of the candidates, if they felt that they were being too bland or too evasive with some of their comments that they would lose their constituency, which is their root, lose their black community. The black community is very interesting, there are probably four or five factions in the black community, they're always has been-- never been able to quite come together except at elections.

MD: [Laughter]

JF: Three or four folks get together and put out a letter and everybody votes.

MD: These factions, are they political or economically divided or are they just location?

JF: Political. They're politically as well as probably economically divided in terms of income--more political than anything I think.

MD: When you were, during the time you were mayor, that's when they had the Klan marching, right?

JF: Which time?

MD: Well, you became mayor when?

JF: I was mayor pro tem when they had the shootings.

MD: Can you tell me a little bit about your memories about that period?

JF: I spent about three days at City Hall in the basement command center with the police department. [Jim] Melvin--he's the man you need to talk to about that--he was mayor then. Then we had two subsequent marches. We had the--I mean they were right around that--we had the march of [phone rings] basically the CWPs, [Communist Workers Party] Socialist Workers Party, and then we had the march, we had the funeral parade and then we had the march. The funeral parade--then we had a group come in from Atlanta, Georgia, to organize that one, the big march.

Its interesting to watch these folks. You know, they came in here under the guise of religion and all the other kinds of things. Really--interesting people--the guy, sitting in his basement, painting "love" on the hand-grenades.

MD: Well, going back to the '79 march when the shootings were, that's when you were mayor pro tem, if you had any memories of that period right before, you know, right after what was going on in City Hall and on the council and in the mayor's chamber.

JF: Mostly it was the mayor and I who were camped out at City Hall. It was a very—I'm not sure what the word I want to use is--it was a very--there was a lot of tension, it was a very stressful time because I think the community felt that they had been betrayed in the media in the sense that the people that were responsible for all of this were not from Greensboro. And yet Greensboro was being indicted, depicted as a very radical, racist community.

And I don't know how you would declare that fact. You know, it is sort of like if somebody comes into your home and shoots the place up, is it because your door locks were not adequate? You know, is it because you didn't make an attempt to stop that? You know, because by the time that someone comes to break the door down, it's too late to react--and that was the kind of the feeling that was pervasive I think within the community. Most people were abhorrent of the situation that occurred, and yet they really had a deep frustration as to how to react to it or how to deal with it. You know, it's done, it happened.

And yet, there was a large number of people who seemed to feel that it would be inappropriate if the opportunity to capitalize on that event was allowed to pass.

And we keep getting a lot of that today. And it has not affected our ability to conduct the city. Most of the people you know here, that live here, most of the rhetoric and propaganda that came out of that was fraught with lies and innuendo and there was

no--you know, it did not tell anything about the community other than the fact that a very important event had taken place there, and yet the guilt that people seem to wish to lay on the community had some impact.

I don't think anything except maybe the picture of the bombing of Pearl Harbor has been shown any more than the picture of the Klan-Nazi group running around half the street [Laurel Street and Carver Drive]--housing properties [Morningside Homes]--shooting people. You know after the first four or five thousand times you see it, it wears pretty thin.

MD: You mentioned that you and the mayor were in a command center in city hall at this time?

JF: Yeah, you see we had several things that were taking place. There were several areas in the community where some of the antagonists, and I'm not talking about the Klan, I'm talking about some of the other folks, were stockpiling weapons. There was a case of the new tennis-ball-sized hand grenades missing from Fort Bragg; a search of a dormitory at Duke University uncovered two of them. And these people were intending to come to Greensboro to participate in a march. So, you know, one of those things in a trash can in the coliseum would make a tidy little mess.

And there were several fires attempted in grocery stores and other buildings in and around the black community at night. But there was, as much on one side of the--probably more, you know, from a defensive reaction standpoint in the black community and the surrounding, at that time, then there was at--other guys had gone to jail and the rest of them left town to escape. So there was a lot more going on in the community. We avoided two bombings. We drank four thousand gallons of coffee just trying to stay, you know, calm or maintain some degree of sanity during a very stressful, traumatic period.

MD: So it was really a stressful and tense period for the city as well as for a lot of the people in the city I think. Would that be fair to say?

JF: Yes. You know, our responsibility was to protect the people of the community. Anytime you have something like that, you get all kinds of reports. You have to run everyone of them down. "Some guy is running around in my back yard with a sawed-off shotgun." You know, things start to go bump in the night.

Very few communities could have withstood I think what Greensboro did, communities of this size. You do something like this in New York, Atlanta, Boston, and it's just another bunch of nuts out there running around. It's on the news today and it's gone tomorrow. But when it happens in Greensboro, which is "Southern Klan"--we didn't have any Klansmen in Greensboro. Well, sure there's some sympathizers. You know, anytime you have a gathering of three or more rednecks together, you get Klan

sympathizers. But you have those in New Hampshire—you have those anywhere. But, you know, for Greensboro to shoulder this burden and to be splashed across the news worldwide that this is a racist community, it's just a joke.

We happened to have hosted this event, simply because some of our more active residents decided that it would be a good event to call the Klan out, to bring them into the community. Well, these groups have been together for, you know, shoving matches for ten years. Greensboro's always been a hotbed for communist activity, since back in the twenties.

And the efforts were to simply organize the textile workers and the folks just wouldn't take no for an answer. The textile workers just didn't want to be organized. Primarily because of the Cones, some of our extremely far-sighted and progressive Jewish business people, built homes and looked after their employees, much as you would your own children. It just really took extreme steps to have the employers to look after their employees. And yet their wages were not commensurate with someone who worked in a steel mill. Back in the fifties, they were making five dollars an hour to work in a steel mill--holding their breath in the eighties for thirty-eight dollars an hour, you know?

MD: [Laughter]

JF: So where did that get them, you know? That got them Japanese steel. And yet, you know, on a national level, the textile employees were very underpaid [phone rings-pause in the interview]. So, you know, those folks thought the Communists sought to act on behalf of the these people--so you know, they'd been in shoving matches with the Communists at the gates at Proximity and Revolution Mills for years.

They had a little spat down in, it wasn't a little spat, it was a fairly active confrontation down in China Grove, months before it took place up here. You know, they'd always been scratching and clawing and picking at each other--the rednecks, the Klan and the Nazis, and the Communists.

So when they, you know, had all this rhetoric, all this conversation, the prevailing attitude was, "here we go again". When in fact, it was not like the other confrontations--the other confrontations between the Klan, there was a definite intent on the part of the Klan, whether it was intent or whether it was caused by the beating on the trucks and the vans and the cars and the rock throwing that took place, we may never know. You know, whether they came to simply call them names back and break up an otherwise peaceful demonstration, we may never truly know. But what happened was certainly not expected, I don't think, by either party.

[End Tape 1, Side A—Begin Tape 1, Side B]

MD: Now when the Klan wanted to march again the first time after that, you were the mayor, after the '79 incident. [phone rings]

JF: No. I think the Klan--I can't remember if the Klan marched again when Melvin was mayor or not. I don't think they did. Maybe I was? Yeah.

MD: But what was the kind of reaction both from the city at large and within the [city] government [about the march on November 3, 1979]?

JF: The Communists wanted to march. [Others said] "Go away, we don't want you." We didn't want either one of them. The prevailing thought was "take them out to Memorial Stadium and give them guns and let them shoot it out--both sides."

MD: [Laughter]

JF: The real victim I think in the process was the black community.

MD: How So?

JF: Well, I felt that both were using the other [Klan-Nazi group and the CWP] as a means to get their viewpoint across at the expense of the black community. The black community was caught, you know, in the crossfire. One, between the Communists who felt that they were going to be representatives of the black community and that they were speaking for the downtrodden and the underprivileged. And the Klan, who felt like they were the representatives for the white community, and they were speaking for the white community and whatever they did would tear the black community.

I think in the case, they both were sorely misled and I know they didn't--either group--speak for Greensboro. I think that's pretty much what the prevailing thought was within the community. We didn't want the Klan here anymore, we didn't want the Nazis or the Communists here. We were big kids, we could work out our problems with our neighbors. Subsequently, we think that a lot of our efforts went down the tubes because of that event. And you'd be mad too.

MD: Now during the time you were mayor, what during the years you were mayor, what if anything stands out as a particular, either crisis in the city or a particular high, you know, high points?

JF: Well, obviously, we went from an at-large to a district form of government and that created, at least initially, a sense of suspicion. There was something here that we were trying to pull off and what we had to do was come up with a formula that would keep

both sides fairly harmless--something they felt that they could live with--and that's what we did. To have run it back through the electorate, [phone rings] I think it would have resulted in defeat. I think we would have been beaten again. And what we did was basically we made everybody mad, so we knew we were pretty close to finding out the right formula, because you can't make everybody happy. But when you make everybody mad, you know, you probably, both sides don't necessarily like you, you know that you are pretty close.

And, you know, that's probably the high point in terms of, you know, after that it was just a matter of getting in there and doing what was right. You know, it is never easy to do something that you don't necessarily want to do or believe in. I never believed that the district system was the answer to our problems and yet it had become a rallying point, you know, for black Greensboro, because that was the reason that they couldn't elect anybody.

And when you mention Henry Frye, his ability to just clean house every time he ran, nobody would talk about that. And, I don't understand that--never understood it. You know, excuse me, lunch. [His lunch arrives]

Maybe, somebody one day will explain it to me, maybe Henry is viewed as someone who feels that he does not represent the average black in Greensboro. But, you know, I would like to think that they would hope to be more represented by that kind of average than another kind of average, which I don't know what that is, but Henry is a fine, up-standing individual.

MD: Wasn't part of the district plan tied to the annexation of some area?

JF: Yeah, we got to the point where we could not annex raw land without Justice Department approval, because it--whether there were people living on it or not. The feeling was that eventually people would live on it I guess and lose the black vote. You know, there was a large but very organized component in the community that wanted one kind of plan and another group wanted another kind of plan. A lot of suspicion evaporated as a result of that. I don't think we don't have a better system of government but you certainly have, for whatever reason, a better relationship with the black community.

MD: Were there any other points either during your tenureship as mayor or in general that you'd like to make?

JF: No. Well, you know, I think that most people would recognize that when I was mayor that if I didn't believe in what they were saying I'd work against them. I didn't care who they were. If I was in favor of it, then I would support it. As long as they were honest with me, I was honest with them. And I have to say in six years I think we pushed race relations to an all time high.

I feel that way. I don't know what kind of response you're getting from other parts of the community and talking to other people. I personally feel that when I left office last year, that race relations were better than they had been in the last, probably twenty years, since the sixties. And maybe, you know, there's a lot of things that should have.

[End of Interview]