

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

INTERVIEWEE: Sarah Herbin

INTERVIEWER: Kathy Hoke

DATE: June 5, 1990

[Begin Tape 1, Side A]

KATHY HOKE: This is June 5, 1990. This is Kathy Hoke. I'm in the home of Mrs. Sarah Herbin and we'll just begin. Maybe you could introduce yourself and tell a little about where you were born, when you were born, and where you grew up?

SARAH HERBIN: Okay, okay. Well, my name is Sarah Herbin. I was born in Concord, North Carolina, September 15, 1916, which means I'll be seventy-four on my birthday this year. My mother and father--well, my father was a congregational minister, and my mother was a teacher. And I was the youngest of seven in our family. And I must say that what I have done, what little I have accomplished really I give credit to my parents, you know, who instilled us all with a sense of well-being. At that time, you know we were--Papa was a preacher, and back in those days, you know, there was--preachers just made very, very little money.

And we were poor but we didn't know we were poor. I mean poor in terms of money, you know monetary, material things. But we were rich in spirit and it's one thing that our parents have instilled in us. And you know, we were happy. We grew up in a loving home, in a happy home and it was just--it was fun being in a big family, with the exception of the fact that I was the youngest and I was always the one, "Sarah, run upstairs and get this. Sarah run to the store and get this. Sarah do this, that, and the other." But all in all it was a very enjoyable experience. And let me say this, too. My mother back in the 1890s went to school at Scotia Seminary, which is now Barber-Scotia [College] in Concord. And honestly, I think sometimes she had a better education than I did because this is when all of these New Englanders, these white New Englanders, came down to these--to teach these young blacks and to just impart everything that they could, you know, to them. And Momma was just so--they studied Greek, Latin, philosophy, you know, all kinds--and grammar, and penmanship. And before I go I want to show you her autograph book from the 1890s where the--

KH: Oh. I'd like to see that.

SH: --the classmates wrote in there. And I would ask Momma, I'd say, "What does such and such word mean?"

[She said,] "Get your dictionary, look it up. You'll remember it better." And she

was just beautiful, just--I was out teaching. My first year teaching and the principal had asked me to make a speech to the PTA [Parent Teacher Association]. And he said, "I want the subject 'a home without books is like a house without windows.'"

I wrote Momma, I said, "Momma, write me a speech." And she wrote a beautiful paper. I got such congratulations on the paper and whatnot.

And anyway, before you go I want to show you a letter she wrote me over fifty years ago where she said, "I'm glad the paper was received in time." But there was just so much more in that letter that was so, so beautiful. She said at the bottom of the letter, "There may be too much in this letter for you to digest at once. Read parts of it daily until you get hold of it." Which was actually true, but I'd, you know, like to share that with you.

KH: Okay. Yeah, yeah. Sure, I'd like to see it.

SH: It doesn't have to be part of the tape.

I'd like to share that. But coming on up to the civil rights days, I guess back in nineteen--my experience really started when I started working with the American Friends Service Committee.

KH: Well, could you back up a little bit and tell me a little bit about where you went to college or school?

SH: Oh yeah. I, I--my father was a minister and I started school in Charlotte and then we moved to Troy, and then we moved to High Point, which was our last family home. And I finished high school at William Penn High School. And I went to Bennett [College] and graduated from there. I did some graduate work at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. I was interested in music and then I was going to get my masters in music, but I didn't finish that. I went two years--two summers. And then I decided to get married and I never did get back. But anyway, I taught for ten years in the public schools in North Carolina--Graham for two years, Siler City for three years, and then here in Greensboro, this was before they closed the Lutheran, Immanuel Lutheran College. It was a high school and junior college and I taught in the high school there. English and music and whatnot.

After that my husband and I went to New York and we stayed there for five years and that was an interesting experience. I worked in the wholesale on the--in the bookkeeping department of a wholesale coat and suit house. And then I returned home when his mother died, came to Greensboro. And we lived right across the street from Bennett College and the president of Bennett knew the family very well and so he had offered me a job in the bookkeeping department.

KH: Is that Willa Player?

SH: No, that was David Jones. That was before Dr. Player [unclear]. And I worked up there for two or three years and that was prior to my working with the American Friends Service Committee. I left Bennett and worked with the American Friends Service Committee for ten years in their merit employment program. And this was really what

got me all keyed-up.

KH: Yeah, I would like to hear more about that. Could you tell me how--how you got connected with them?

SH: I was in the president's office at Bennett and a friend of mine who was a secretary at the American Friends Service Committee said, "Sarah, I wish you would come and get on the staff at the Friend, the American Friends." She said, "They gonna be needing a secretary pretty soon."

And I, you know, went to talk to the executive director, you know, just for the heck of it. And he said, "Well, I'll take your application." And in April, I think it was, that year they called me and said--asked me when could I come to work? And, oh, I said, "Give me two weeks." And I sat down and wrote the president a letter of resignation. Oh, he was so disappointed. But that was--that was really a change, the change in my life at that point that I think really made the biggest difference in my whole--not outlook, but it changed the whole type of experiences that I had from then on.

KH: Do you remember what year that was?

SH: Yes, that was in 1953. I went to work as a secretary to the director of the merit employment program. And the interesting thing about it--see, his job was to visit employers to encourage them to employ Negroes--we were at that time--in nontraditional employment.

KH: Good jobs.

SH: Yeah. Good jobs. Not because they were being pressured to do it, but because it was morally right. And you know, the Quakers don't believe in coercion or this kind of thing, and they appeal to the conscience of the employers. And my job at that time was to type up the reports to send to the Philadelphia office. And I remember one experience that really just grabbed me.

We had these old Dictaphones and I was listening to this and the person said--I can't tell you the employer that he talked to--said, Mr. So-and-So said, "Well as far as I'm concerned there's no such thing as a qualified Negro. The mere fact that they're Negroes means that they're not qualified."

And I was--I snatched those things out of my ears and tears was just rolling down my eyes. And I just got up and went to the front door--you know, they had a big house, this is where the offices were--and I was just crying.

And one of the staff members came down and he said, "Sarah, what's wrong? What's wrong?"

This was my response, not even realizing I'm talking to a Quaker minister. I said, "Sometimes I get so mad. I feel like getting up to--on Jefferson Square and shooting every white person I see," you know, in tears.

And he said, "Sarah, Sarah." And then he said, you know, "It's going to be all right," he told me, you know.

I went on back to sit down and I was thinking, "Oh, me. I'm talking about this

violent stuff in front of the Quakers.” [laughs]

But that, you know, really started, you know. I knew that there was prejudice. I had never been exposed to a lot of, you know, the things from adults. Of course as a child I had experience. One thing that I’ll never forget--I was about nine--eight or nine years old. And where we lived in High Point, to go to the store--sometimes Momma would send me to the store, which was about two blocks away. It was in a white neighborhood. And I would have to pass this house with this little boy out there in the yard that had this dog named Spot.

And if he was out there whenever I would pass, and he would say, “Come here Spot. Come here Spot.” And he’d say, “Spot, what would you rather be, a nigger or a dead dog?” And the dog would just lay up on his back like he was dead, you know.

Boy, I’d go home crying every day, you know, having to pass that. And so Momma would console me with the fact [that], “Nothing [is] wrong with you. You are just as good as anybody else and you can show people,” you know, “you study hard and do this.” And, you know, “You don’t even pay any attention to that.”

But anyway, this--I worked as a secretary, you know. And I could really get some insights into the reasons that black people were not employed in very good jobs. And several years--not several years. Let’s see, it must have been about three years. See, I was with the Service Committee for ten years. About four years or five years later the director of that program left. His wife died and he moved to another area of the state and the executive secretary said, “Sarah, I don’t see any reason why you can’t be director of that program.”

[I said], “Oh, no. I can’t do that.”

He said, “Sure you can.” He said, “You’ve been involved with the program. You know--you’ve typed up the reports. You know a lot of the contacts.” He said, “And I don’t see any reason why you can’t be.”

So I said, “Okay, I’ll give it a try.” So--and that put me in a different level of involvement, because that meant that now I had to call employers, personnel directors, managers of businesses to get appointments to sit down and talk to them to determine what their vacancies are. And then, when they would tell me--then the other part of my job was to visit high schools and colleges to recruit people for those jobs. And that was a satisfying experience.

And to some degree the doors just didn’t open, you know, as much as we would like. But it was a start, and it gave me more confidence in talking with employers. And I didn’t get the rejection that a lot of people thought I would get. And an interesting thing about this: the job description for the man who preceded me said that in order for someone to do this job in the South, it should be a white male.

KH: And was that the man’s description?

SH: It should be a white male--Southern male, because they felt that they would be interviewing white males in these top level jobs and they could communicate better. And it was interesting when it was reversed and Mr. Bell said, you know, “Sarah.” And here I am a black female. But it’s amazing the response that I got from that.

KH: Could you describe that response?

SH: Can't think of any one particular. But generally, it was a very good response. It was a very, very good response. I did--that did not mean that I got jobs at every place, but getting into the door, you know, was no problem. And I guess what they call the Southern hospitality, the graciousness, you know--even if they didn't have any openings, they would at least sit down and talk with me on a level, which was really satisfying.

For instance, let me tell you some of the first people that I had placed on jobs. When--before Western Electric became AT&T--you know where the cotton mill outlet is?

KH: Oh, right. On Pomona?

SH: Pomona. Uh-huh. That used to be Western Electric. And I talked to the personnel manager there at Western Electric about some jobs. And he said, "Well, I don't know. What kind of jobs are you talking about?"

I said, "You know, clerical, technical jobs. You know, draftsmen, engineers, clerk, typist, stenographers. You know, whatever."

And he said, "Well, I do have a vacancy for a librarian, someone who could be responsible for the technical library." And he said, "I don't know. I'll check to see if they're, you know, if we need any engineers or whatnot." And he said, "You call me back."

I said, "When?"

So I called him back and he said, "Yeah, as a matter of fact we do need a librarian and we could have--we could, I think--we'd like to interview some engineers." And the librarian that I referred to them, Marj Battle, they hired her. And somebody told me--I haven't seen her in a couple of--oh, it's been several years. But she was still there. And the first black engineer, O.[Osborne] C. Stafford--you've probably seen his name in the paper goo-gobs [sic] of times. He's running against Bill Martin. Senator Martin.

KH: Yeah. Right, right, right. Wasn't he on the social services committee?

SH: Yes.

KH: Yes, that's where I knew his name.

SH: Yes, you've seen his name in the paper a lot. [laughs] But anyway, and he's still out there at AT&T now. So, well, that and Greensboro--

KH: But he got his initial engineering job through--

SH: Through me.

KH: --through you.

SH: --and the American--the Friends. And--oh, there was--one of these days I'm gonna try to put all of this stuff together to see how many people all over the state that I have gotten in

jobs--even people--oh, gosh. I can't even remember. At P. Lorillard, they were just beginning to open and someone in their research lab had--I had employed--I had, you know, sent to them. And I had thought about this. I should have sort of prepared for this interview and had some of this stuff written down so that I could remember. But anyway, I didn't. And I'll go back and pick up some things if I forget. I did this for the last five years I was with American Friends Service Committee. All right. This was beginning the early sixties. And--'cause I was--ten years I was there, from '53 to '63. Well, you know, the early sixties right after 1960, you know, there were demonstrations all over the state, and that was the time that Terry Sanford was governor. And I don't know if you've heard of Floyd McKissick.

KH: Yeah, yeah. I can't--

SH: The guy that started Soul City.

KH: Right, right.

SH: And he was a very active civil rights lawyer. And at that time Floyd was telling Governor Sanford, he said, "Look, Governor, we've got to have some more black people in state government jobs. I mean some good jobs."

And the governor told him, he said, "Well, yeah, but who are we going to find to do something like that?"

So Floyd said, "Sarah Herbin. She's been doing that with the Friends," you know, he said, "for the last ten years." And said, "She could--"

And [the] governor said, "Could she do that?"

He said, "Sure, she could do that."

So he sent me to come down to Raleigh. And I went to the governor's office, and he sent me over to the director of the personnel department. And this man looked at me and he said, "Well, I don't know why you would want to leave your job. I understand you're doing a very good job at the, you know, with the Friends. And I don't know why you would," you know, "be interested in leaving that job."

He said, "Did you ever--did you ever do any writing on your job?"

I said, you know, "Writing? Like what?"

"Like reports and whatnot."

I said, "Yeah." I said, "I had to do an annual report every year."

"Well, I'd like to see a copy of one."

And I said, "Well, I'm sorry, that's not available to you. This is confidential for the files of the American Friends Service Committee and that's not available." "Well, I--we're gonna think about this and we'll be in touch."

I said, "Thank you very much." And I went straight back to the governor's office. I said--the person who was in--I said--and I said, "I'd like to talk to the governor."

And he said, "Okay."

I said, "Governor, thank you very much for offering me this job. But thanks and no thanks."

He said, "Well, what's the matter?"

I said, "I couldn't work over there in that personnel department."

He said, "Well, all I have to do is tell them that you're gonna be there, no ifs, ands, and buts. And that's it."

I said, "No. Because the atmosphere would not be conducive to my doing a good job if I had to work in an environment like that." And I said, "But I thank you anyway."

So he said, "Well, don't give up. We'll see if we can work out something."

All right, about two weeks later I got a call in the morning from one of his--one of the governor's aides. He said, "Sarah, this is Joel." I don't know whether it was Joel or Franklin or somebody [unclear]. "I think we've got things worked out."

I said, "Where is the job?"

He said, "It's gonna be in the department of administration. And you're gonna be working out of the office of Dave Coltrane, who's head of the Good Neighbor Council."

I said, "Number two." I said, "Now how is this job to be carried out?" See, the governor was talking about getting black people in state government. I said, "Because this is a new--you don't have a job description for this." I said, "How would this job be carried out?"

He said, "Any way you want to do it."

I said, "Okay, all right. It's a deal."

And so he said, "Well, we want you to report to work September the first." You know, blah-de-blah [sic].

So I went to work. The first day on the job, the governor had asked me to draft a letter that would go to the heads of every state agency explaining to them that the state, you know, in an effort to promote merit employment, that we are hiring, you know, Sarah Herbin to blah, blah, blah, blah.

And, you know, I drafted the letter and sent it to the governors office. And he sent the letter back and everything that I had was--he didn't change a thing. The only thing he did was to add another paragraph saying that Sarah Herbin has been doing this and her qualifications are blah-de-blah-de-blah. And so he sent that letter out to the state agencies, and as they would respond, you know, positively, he would send me copies of the letter so that I could go on and make appointments, you know, with the personnel directors, or you know, whoever, to find out what kinds of jobs they had. And so that gave me--I didn't have to go floundering about to see--you know, to see. Some I would just take on my own anyway. But that was a very interesting experience. What--

KH: Could you tell me a little bit more about the Good Neighbor Councils and what their job was?

SH: The Good Neighbor Council was a council that was organized--that was founded by the governor in an effort--there was a state Good Neighbor Council trying to promote good interracial relations across the state, and then what they were trying to do is to get a Good Neighbor Council in each community so that they could do this on a local level. And I think I've got a brochure on that. I've got so much stuff in here packed up. Um--

KH: And your job was in the state office of the Good Neighbor Council?

SH: Yes, Yes.

KH: And you were to place people in that office?

SH: No, not in that office. In state government--in state agencies.

KH: I see.

SH: Highway department, person--you know, in revenue department, transportation. In, you know, wherever there's a vacancy. So all of the state agencies, you know, the health department. And that gave me an opportunity to check colleges and high schools to see what--who was ready to go into jobs as a--really as a kind of a pioneer, to go into these jobs. And we had some--you know, it was slow--but let me--could you cut that off for a minute?

KH: Oh sure, sure.

[Recorder paused]

KH: We're back again, and we're talking about your work at--with the American Friends Service Committee.

SH: Yeah, we were back and forth, and the state government.

KH: Yeah, yeah. But when you worked with textile companies, what was your experience in those contacts?

SH: Well, I guess the most positive one that we had was one experience at Burlington Industries, because they had hired a Negro secretary in their executive office. And she was very good. She was very good. She made an excellent pioneer. That was not the case in some of the other textile places. Another textile place we interviewed to find some clerical workers, and the personnel director there asked me to send him some light-skinned Negroes.

KH: Could you tell us which company this was?

SH: I would not like to.

KH: Okay, all right. [Laughter] Well, go on.

SH: And I said, "I beg your pardon?" He said, "I'd like for you to send me some light-skinned Negroes."

I said, "Do you realize what you are asking me for?" And I don't think he understood what I was saying. I said, "You know, you hear so much talk about miscegenation and if you mix all of the races and whatnot. You imagine what it would be like." I said, "Where do you think light-skinned Negroes come from? You know they didn't come from Africa looking like that." I said, "And how do you think they got to be light-skinned?" And he just sort of shoved it off and changed the subject about something

else.

But a lot of people's perception--you know, when you think about blacks and whites together, [the] first thing you think about, you know, [is] inter-marriage, inter-marriage. And, you know, what are the children going to look like? When these blacks and whites get together, what are the children going to look like? I said, "Some of them will look like you and some of them will look like me. And some will look like people in all different shades of the rainbow from light to dark." But I'll tell you, that was really some experience.

KH: I'm sure your experience with American Friends Service Committee helped you a great deal in your job in, with the state.

SH: In state government. Absolutely.

KH: In some ways, perhaps, you were like a headhunter?

SH: Right. Right. Right. And there were--and I can't remember all of the different types of jobs. I know one--when I was talking with the person in the state government in the highway department, and he was asking me, he said, "I'll tell you. You could help us find--there's a job that we're looking for we're looking for some candidates for a Kelsh plotter."

I said, "I beg your pardon?"

"We're looking for a Kelsh plotter."

I said, "I bet you can't find white people for those jobs, can you? For that job?"

"Well, as a matter of fact I can't."

I said, "Now how in the world do you think I can find black people for a job--a Kelsh plotter--when you can't find white people for it? I don't even know what that is. What is a Kelsh plotter?" And this is a man who rides in a plane with the pilot who takes photographs of the ground to plot areas, you know.

KH: For aerial photographs?

SH: Yes, yes. And he--I said, "Now listen. This is just unrealistic for you to ask me to find a black person as a Kelsh plotter." This day and time a lot of people who are photographers or whatnot wouldn't have access to planes just for that. Anyway, I could get a lot of--and one, I can't remember what place it was--somebody had asked me for a PhD in chemistry with all kinds of experience in chemical, you know, in an industrial setting--and could ask for all kinds of outrageous jobs. So a lot of jobs we couldn't get. But we had to start with what we could start at, with lab technicians, and clerical jobs, and some technical jobs in the health department, some lab--some research people.

KH: The people that you placed in jobs, did you hear back from them about how the jobs were working out?

SH: Yes, yes.

KH: What generally were you finding?

SH: Generally, generally good results. Generally good results. I would ask them to keep in touch with me. And if any problems developed, you know, to really let me know, so we could see how things worked out. But let's see [papers shuffled]--I don't--oh yes, this was when P. Lorillard--it says, "After repeated visits to the director of personnel, we were asked to locate a PhD in organic chemistry, one who had previous experience with infrared photometer in an industrial setup."

KH: You're reading from a report that you wrote.

SH: That's a report that I wrote back in 1961.

KH: I see. Guess that was a hard order to fill?

SH: Yeah. Of course it was next to impossible to find someone with that kind of experience. However we did refer to them seven persons, two with master's degrees, and five with PhDs in organic chemistry, all interested in accepting the position. They were not employed because top management felt at the time that they did not want to set the patterns for the community. They said, "When in Rome, do as the Romans do."

KH: P. Lorillard has changed a lot since that time, but back in the late fifties and early sixties they were kind of--they were reticent about hiring blacks in good jobs.

SH: Right. Because see, this was just not long after the plant had opened and the interesting thing--the national office of the American Friends Service Committee had a person who was the director of community relations who tried to coordinate the work at the local level with the national headquarters of organizations. And so at the same time I was talking with P. Lorillard here, they would be contacting the national office of P. Lorillard so that there could be some kind of coordination to let them know that it was just not somebody at a local community, you know, trying to break things up. And that was very supportive. That was very supportive. But um--let's see. Now when--I left state government when Governor Sanford left office.

KH: I see, uh-huh.

SH: When he left office, he had made arrangements for me to have a job with this North Carolina Fund. This was an agency that he created; he had seven and a half million dollars from the Ford Foundation and seven and a half million from the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation to set up the first antipoverty program. These were demonstration projects to--there was a forerunner to the--what do you call them--the antipoverty programs, but they have a--community action.

KH: OEO.

SH: OEO, yeah.

KH: Office of Economic Opportunity.

SH: Yes. Yeah. They had these poverty programs all over. But this was like a demonstration prior to it and so he arranged for me to have a job there. The office was in Chapel Hill, or Durham, really. And I was community service representative. And there were several of us that were working--see there were eleven community action agencies and each one of us had two projects that we worked on. And mine was in--one was in Rocky Mount and the other one was in Murfreesboro. And part of my job there was to see that these community action agencies were really meeting the needs of the poor, and to see that people were involved--the local people were involved in the various kinds of projects that were being set up.

KH: Were you in--let's see--you were working for Friends in 1960 when the sit-ins started, is that right?

SH: Well, yeah--

KH: You're here in Greensboro then?

SH: Yes.

KH: What do you recall about that time when, when the four A&T [North Carolina A&T State University] students came to the Woolworth's, and what do you remember about the--

SH: I, I, I was at that time a member of the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] executive committee meeting and the fellows that were going to sit-in had asked the NAACP for their support. That was before they sat in, before they were--they told the group what they had planned to do and they wanted to get the support of the NAACP. And of course there was an agreement that this was certainly--this certainly should be done.

And the next day when it happened--it was an exciting time in Greensboro because there were marches every night and the demonstrations, and we used to rush home from work to get our dinner so we could join the march in the evenings, and then we'd end up at a church, you know, where there would be, you know, talks, singing, and whatnot. And it was an exciting time, to see how you could corral the support of the community.

Of course there were still some people who were sort of shy and who were afraid to get in there and I thought it--you know, sometimes we'd be marching, we'd have silent marches. And we were marching downtown one evening and I know one of these guys, you know, we used to call them the duck tail boys, you know, with the leather jackets. These guys were standing around and hooting and you know, just harassing. And I passed one and as I was passing by I hear him say, "Two, four, six, eight. We don't want to integrate."

And I looked at him and I thought to myself, "Would I have to?" Just as if I would be anxious to integrate with him, with his attitude, you know. But anyway, I'm

getting all of these dates and times mixed up.

KH: Those marches, I guess, included a cross section of the black community and a smattering of white folks?

SH: Yes. Yes, it did. And it was interesting to see older people involved in the marches. And then some would bring their children, and sometimes they would go and sit down in the middle of the street and hold hands. And it was just--it was just a moving time, just real exciting, hoping that something--that this was doing some good. But, I don't know, time--just time wears on.

Oh, let me tell you about another experience that I had when I was working with the American Friends Service Committee. You know it used to be GTC instead of--I mean GTI--

KH: Oh, the Guilford Tech--

SH: --Guilford Technical Institute. I had been to them at the Jamestown facility to ask about the different kinds of training programs they had and the enrollment. [They said,] "Oh no, no problem."

So there was a girl, a young black girl, that came to our office--to my office. And she said that one of the textile places--not textile, yeah--upholstery, cutting and sewing--they had a class, a course in that. And one of the--she had applied for a job in one of the places. And they said, "If you take that course at GTI, you know, then we could employ you."

And I said, "Hey, that's great." And so I said, "Well, let's go to GTI and see about taking that course." So we left my office and we drove out to GTI.

She was asking somebody about taking this course in upholstery cutting and sewing. [He said,] "Well, I'm sorry, we don't have any vacancies. I'll give you an application and you know, you can fill it in and send it back to us some time." And so I said, "We can fill it in now." And so he looked kind of mad, but anyhow we sat down and I was helping her fill out that application.

"Well, we don't know when we'll have any vacancies, but we'll call you."

I said, "Thank you." Well, see, my secretary at the American Friends Service Committee was a white girl from High Point, Marion Holbrook[?]. So I was telling Marion, I said, "You know--"

She said, "You know that is not so." She said, "I'll tell you, let me go out there this afternoon and apply for that course."

And--cause they had said formerly you can't take this course unless you have been offered a job. So I said, "Okay, good." And so Marion went out there to apply for a job. And when she came back she was just livid.

She said, "I knew they were lying!" She said, "I told them that," you know, "I was interested in this course in upholstery cutting and sewing." And she said, "Now I don't have a job in that, but I just wanted to take it just for my own benefit."

[They said,] "Sure! We have a vacancy. Come let me show you around through the," you know, "through the place and all the departments," and showed her this and what all she could accomplish by getting--you know, by taking this course, and [said]

“you could do this at home and that and the other.” And oh, I was furious. So the first thing I did was to call the person who was chairman of the state human relations agency. What’s the man’s name? He lived up in the Western part of the state. He was an attorney.

KH: He died recently?

SH: He died some time ago. Several--anyway, and I had known him from other experiences. And so I called him and told him, you know, what had happened. He said, “Look, I’ll tell you what.” He said, “The commission is going to have a meeting in Raleigh on Saturday, September the eighteenth.” He said, “Do you think you could get those two girls to come and bring a written statement of their experiences and come to Raleigh and present this?”

I said, “I sure will. I’ll be there.” And Marion said yes, she would be glad to do it. And this other girl--I can’t remember her name. So I took them in my car, we rode down to Raleigh. They had the meeting on Shaw University campus. And they were asking, you know, different people if they had something to say. I said, “Yes, I have two young ladies that--”

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

SH: --I read her report and then you could hear, you know, “Mmm,” you know, comments from the audience. And a lot of people, you know, wanted to talk to each one of the girls afterwards. But anyway, that was on a Saturday.

Sunday morning the newspapers had this on the front page of the paper. And that--it was during that next week that Governor Sanford had made this public statement that GTI would not discriminate in classes and in the courses and blah-de-blah-de-blah from that day on.

And the unfortunate thing about this was Marion--she’s such a strong girl. A lot of her friends called her up, cursed her out on the phone because they had their names in the newspaper, some of them. “Marion, are you crazy going down there saying that--what you said? Girl you are--”

So Marion was telling me, she said, “Look, those people are not friends anyway.” And--what did I do with my pocketbook? Last year--can you cut that off for a minute?

KH: Sure, sure.

[Recorder paused]

SH: You know, I was talking about Marion Holbrook, my secretary.

KH: And that’s a letter to the editor?

SH: Yes. This was after--this article came out last February.

KH: In 1989 in the *News and Record*?

SH: Yes. And this was--she says, "Thank you for your fine article about Sarah Herbin. Volumes could be written about this wonderful lady who was at the forefront of the civil rights movement in the early sixties. As a young white woman, I was fortunate to be her secretary. I learned from this gentle lady how God wants us to treat each other, regardless of our color or status. I was proud back then to call her my boss, but I was much more proud to call her my friend."

KH: Oh, nice.

SH: Marion Holbrook. And I appreciated that and I called her. She's still in High Point. She and her husband have a travel agency and she is just a real delightful person. And just--and as she said, we were really friends, you know, not just a boss and my secretary, you know, relationship, but a friend.

KH: Could we talk a little bit about the later sixties, when conditions and events were changing quite rapidly? And yet not changing much at all. Maybe we could talk a little bit about the black power movement. If you had any contact with--or what contact you had with the black power movement and how that affected the community, the black community especially?

SH: Yes, in some respects. When I was working with the state in--[telephone rings]

KH: Excuse me.

[Recorder paused]

KH: We were talking about the late sixties--

SH: Oh. We were talking about the black power movement and all of that. Yeah, I was in state government at that time. And this whole expression, you know, Stokely Carmichael and all of the guys in the--that expression, "black power" just really, just upset some of the people in state government. And particularly my boss. I call him my boss, you know, Mr. Coltrane. I think I showed you his picture in the--because he was an elderly person and he just thought that everything--that you could accomplish everything, you know, by just being very nice and very, you know--by not upsetting the cart, the apple cart. And I would spend days, hours, trying to explain to him, you know, the "why" of this, and what it felt like to black people, you know, inside. And, you know, it was just hard for a lot of people to realize.

We had some very active people in North Carolina during those days. Howard Fuller and who else was that? Kwame McDonald. Jimmie McDonald. And I know Stokely was in and out of here and several other people. And I know the community action agencies had a program over in the eastern part of the state. And I know Howard Fuller was there and he just was preaching over there in the eastern part of the state. And he said something about he looked forward to the day when he could stand over--could stand up and could see people--see white people digging the ditches while I'm, you know, supervising them. Or something to that extent. [And] that he had to do something

to wake up the apathy of people in the eastern part of North Carolina that were having the most difficult times.

And one of the poorest areas of the state up in Bertie County, and a lot of those--Halifax--and a lot of those counties over in the eastern part of the state. And these people would come in and talk and have, you know, meet at churches and have these marches and whatnot, trying to wake up the apathy of so many people. Well, a lot of them were frightened, and that's understandably so. But--and then it didn't last too long, but I can say that I think it accomplished some things. Now at the same time--and I'm going back and forth--

KH: That's fine.

SH: --with the--and the time period. Now back at the same time when I was working with the Friends, with the approach that the Friends used, this was at the same time that activists were really saying, "If you don't do this," you know, "we'll boycott you." And they were trying to get some black salespersons in Durham. And I know there was the Durham Committee on Negro Affairs, you know, was very active on pushing blacks in nontraditional employment. And some of the areas that they were working in were some of the places where I was working.

And it's funny. You know what the employers would say? We got the same results, but they say, "Well, now, I like your approach," you know, "noncoercive." When I was working for the Friends, we were talking to them about blacks, salesperson in some of the big, you know, downtown stores, and they said, "Yeah, we'll find somebody." But see, when the--it wasn't like we were working against each other.

See, the Durham committee with ten people and they'd say, "If you don't hire somebody within two weeks, you gonna, we gonna have a boycott in front of your store." And then there was that approach and then this approach that said, "We are appealing to your moral conscience." You know--

KH: The Friends approach?

SH: Yeah. And so they would say, "We like your approach." I'd say, "We need results. We need results. It's not like we are competing. We are not competing with each other. It's just this is one approach, and this is another approach. Hopefully one of these will work." And that was an interesting experience.

KH: I guess the differences in strategies became more pronounced as time went on?

SH: Yeah. Until it kind of tapered off. You know, after--

KH: The early seventies.

SH: Yeah. And the late--yeah, in the late sixties. When was--let me see. I just--oh, let me tell you one other little experience that I had. And this was back in 1953.

KH: Before the *Brown [v. Board of Education]* decision?

SH: Was it '53? No. It wasn't '53. It was fifty--around '56. I was working with the American Friends Service Committee and they said--they asked me one day, "Sarah, did--how many black people--do you know any black people working at the Internal Revenue Service?" I said, "No, I don't." And they knew that every civil service exam that would come by I would take it: Clerk typist I, Clerk typist II, you know, this, that. And I just would take them just for the heck of taking them.

So my boss said, one day he said, "Why don't you go by there and apply for a job?" That was in early January. So I went down here on, you know, Federal Place and applied for a job as a secretary. Well--and I had my pocketbook full of all of these ratings.

She said, "Well, you'll have to take a civil service exam for it."

I said, "Yes, I have taken them." I pulled them out one by one, you know, ratings, clerk typist and typist and this, that, and the other.

And they looked at them and they said, "Well, you're going to have to take another test."

I said, "Okay, when?"

"Well, come in on Wednesday morning."

I said, "All right." So, you know, my boss would let me--'cause we were trying to get these doors opened. And so I took the test and two weeks passed and I still hadn't heard anything.

And I'm still on my regular job, you know, doing my job so my boss said one day, "Sarah, whatever happened to the Internal Revenue [Service]?"

I said, "I haven't heard from them."

He said, "Why don't you give them a call and see what happened?"

So I called. "Oh, yes, Ms. Herbin. We were just getting ready to call you and ask you to report to work next Wednesday. But now we don't have any permanent jobs. These are temporary jobs, you know, for the filing season." And I know they usually hire a lot of temporary workers, you know, people asking for various kinds of forms. So they gave me a leave in order to get in there. And I was the first black female in the Internal Revenue.

And so the form said that I was assigned to the returns processing division, which was on the second floor. So when I got there and reported, I went to the personnel office to see, you know, where I was going. And they gave me this form telling me where I was supposed to be. So they said, "We're going to send you where we really need you the most, and we need you downstairs in the basement with--you know, people are requesting forms, you know, and with the other people down there working to mail out these forms to people."

So I went downstairs and there were oh, all of these long tables. And there were girls from other departments would go down there, you know, were transferred down there for--during this period. And the only black faces I saw in there were some black males who were over--who had--you know, when people would send for a hundred or hundreds of forms, you know, they worked with the big boxes there. And the rest of us at the table had to open the mail, envelopes where people wanted five forms, or two forms, or you know, this and mail and that. Which took a lot of skill and intelligence of course, [laughs] to read a letter and to put a form in it.

But anyhow, you know, after that--let me see, when was that? I've forgotten now when they changed the date for filing from March the 15th to April the 15th. But anyway, after the filing date had closed, gradually the girls down there began to go back to their original departments. I looked around there one day and here I am, the only one sitting there at the table. [laughs] All the other girls had gone back. I'm sitting down there by myself, nothing to do, and the black guys over here on the table over there doing all kinds of other stuff.

So I asked the man who was in that department, I said, "Look," I said, "When am I going to the department I was assigned to?"

[He said], "Well, don't you enjoy it down here?"

I said, "I'm not doing anything. I'm just sitting."

So he said, "Well, I'll check on it." So he must have talked to the people upstairs in that department.

And so he sent for me and he said, "I understand you're complaining about your work."

I said, "Complaining? I'm not doing anything. I was originally assigned to the returns processing division. I haven't even seen that department." I said, "And I'm not doing anything here, you know. What's all this about?" And the next thing you know, the next day somebody came and got me, took me upstairs to the second floor, this huge room. Desks--I guess there must have been thirty desks, you know, in this place. And he took me over there and he said, "Now this will be your desk." He said "Now this typewriter is not a new one, but it's reconditioned and maybe you could use it."

And so I sat down and I looked--and I got a piece of paper and put it in it. And that place got quiet as all get out. Everybody--and you know--put the paper in there and they wanted to see if I was going to do [laughter]. [SH taps table in rhythm of a typewriter] "Now is the time for all good men to come to the aid of their country."

[laughs] You know, I'm just typing away. And so the man got up there, I mean I got up and he said, "Well, I want to introduce you to some of the people in the department."

[Someone said,] "Hello, how are you? We're glad to have you here."

KH: Real stiff?

SH: "Hello, how are you? We're glad to have you here." [laughs] They must have told them beforehand that I was coming up there. But anyway, I stayed there until--oh, I guess it must have been another six weeks or something like that.

So I began to ask the other girls there, I said--who were on temporary, you know, like I was--and I said, "How did you get your job here?"

They said, "From the employment office."

I said, "Uh-huh." So at that time they had segregated employment offices.

KH: Oh.

SH: A white office and a black office. So I knew the head of the black office very well, Mr. Wright[?]. And I asked him one day, I said, "Do you ever get any requests from Internal Revenue for clerks or typists or whatnot during the filing season?"

[He said,] "Never. Never."

So I said, "Okay." So then I proceeded with my usual thing in filing a complaint against the federal agencies, you know, the Internal Revenue and other agencies that did not give their work orders.

And so what they would say, "You know, we send it to the office." And it was the white office that would not send these kinds of things over to, you know, to share that with the black office or whatnot. But anyhow, that's--I didn't file a suit, but I filed complaints.

KH: And what happened?

SH: They finally--

KH: Merged the two offices?

SH: Yeah, yeah. But you just, you know, always got to do something. But anyway while I was at the Internal Revenue, you know, they had a little cafeteria, a little restaurant there. And that was back in, yeah, the fifties, '56. So I'd go in there and eat lunch and it was some Greek man that owned it and he didn't say anything the first day. I went in there every day for about a week.

And so the second--I don't know, about I guess--anyway, weeks later he came down--I was still in the basement of Internal Revenue--he came down and asked the man, told the man in my department--the head of the office, he said, "I want to talk to her."

So he called me and I went out in the hall and I said, "Yes?"

He said, "I noticed you've been coming in here to eat--coming in my," you know, "place to eat."

He said, "I just wanted to ask you, please don't come in there anymore."

I said, "Why?"

"Oh, I got my whole life work tied up in this business" he says, "and I've heard people say if you come in there anymore they would just not eat in there any more." Well, you know, people--whoever sat beside me, you know--we would talk and have conversations, you know. I didn't have anybody throwing knives or anything at me. He said, "People are just complaining."

I said, "How many people have complained to you?"

"Oh, two, three, six, eight, ten, fifteen. Lots of people. Lots of people. They just complain. I can't lose my business. I cannot lose my business just to let you come in here."

I said, "Well, I'll tell you one thing." I said, "Before I come in here again, I'll have another talk with you, okay?"

He said, "Okay." So what I was trying to find out--and I got a lawyer to check that for me--to find out if that number one, if that building was owned by the federal government, or if they were leasing it. I found out that the government was leasing only the office space. The man that owned the restaurant was leasing his space directly from the corporation in Atlanta.

So it--I could not get it on the basis of, you know, a federal thing because he was not even involved with the federal activities, you know, with the federal government. So anyway that, that just wasn't enough for me, so I decided to talk to the district director.

And I told him, you know, what the situation was. And I said, "I don't think that's right."

He said, "You mean you, you want--you, you want me to get him to let you eat in that restaurant?"

I said, "Why not?" I said, "This restaurant is put here exclusively for the employees of Internal Revenue Service. I am an employee of Internal Revenue. I'm entitled to the services and everything else that other employees get."

"Oh, but to--that's like asking me--", see, none of the lunch counters downtown-- "that's like asking me to let the Meyers--to ask the Meyers Tea Room to let you go in there. Or all these other places to let you go."

I said, "That's not the same thing. It is not the same thing."

"Well, I just can't do it."

I said, "Well, in that case, since I have to go out of the building for lunch, I'll just take two hours for lunch because it would take me quite some time to get my lunch and then get back here in an hour's time." And I didn't wait for him to say yea, nay, or nothing. I just took two hours for lunch every day. And, you know, that was the end. I didn't pursue that thing any further because of the technical aspects of it.

KH: It must have been kind of humiliating, though, to be told--to not get support from your boss after being told by this store--this restaurant manager that you weren't welcome?

SH: Yeah. Yeah. Well, you know. But I tell you. All kinds of experiences. All kinds of experiences. But all in all, I guess, it helps you to grow and it helps you to understand. 'Cause, you know, our whole family has been involved in all kinds of stuff. You know my sister sued the state of North Carolina way back in the thirties for equalized teachers salaries.

KH: Oh. Huh. Where was she was teaching then?

SH: In High Point. And my Momma was so scared for her that the Ku Klux Klan folk, and, you know, all kinds of--and see that's--when I started teaching, you know, [unclear], the state of North Carolina was paying black teachers--

KH: Less.

SH: With the "A" certificate, college graduate, do you know what North Carolina was paying them? Sixty-six dollars a month. [Of] course that--teachers salaries were low. White people weren't making much more than that, but they were at least making in the hundreds. And then by the time you pay your board and your room, you know, there's not, you know, too much left, you know, that kind of stuff.

But, and then--this same sister that had sued the state--that was way back in the thirties. Her two daughters--she was married, she lived in New York, she separated from her husband and brought her two daughters to North Carolina, to High Point. That's where our home place was. And so that was during the time in the fifties where they had--where--are you a native North Carolinian?

KH: No. I'm from Pennsylvania.

SH: Oh, okay. Well, they had--North Carolina had the Pearsall Plan, you know, if you wanted your children to go to--

KH: Freedom of choice.

SH: You'd have to--well, freedom of choice, but you had to apply, black parents had to apply for their children to go to the quote, the "white school." And so my sister had applied for her two daughters to go to the schools--the white schools in High Point. They were the first two that desegregated the schools in High Point. One was in junior high school with fifteen-hundred white kids. The other one was in senior high school with seventeen-hundred white kids. And I'll tell you that was really an experience. And you know--

KH: Was it hard for your nieces?

SH: Well, they were strong and my sister and then the black community really, you know, helped to bolster them. The principal looked at the oldest one's grades and he says--see they went to William Penn, the black school, the first year they were home, and it was the second year that they had applied for transfer. He looked at her card [telephone rings] and he said, "I see you have nothing but A's and B's here. You're not going to make that in my school."

[Recorder paused]

KH: We were talking about your nieces and what the principal said to the older girl.

SH: Yeah. "I see you made all these A's and B's, but you're not going to make those in my school," he said, "'cause an A over at William Penn is equivalent to a B or C at my school."

And so Lynn said--you know she had that determined look on her face so Momma said, "Lynn I looked at that expression on your face and I knew exactly what that look meant."

She said, "What Momma?"

"That I'm gonna show him anyhow."

So that first six weeks when the grades came out--see Lynn was a smart student anyway--got an A in English, an A in History, A in Chemistry, A in Algebra. Straight A's. They wouldn't even put the honor roll in the school paper. They didn't put it--they used to put it in the *[Greensboro] Daily News*. They didn't put it in the paper anywhere. 'Cause she was just determined--she was a bookworm anyway.

KH: They didn't put the honor roll in the paper because your niece made the honor roll?

SH: Her name couldn't be in there along with the mayor's daughter, or you know, all the other kinds of stuff.

KH: Wow.

SH: Now the one that was in junior high school was not a scholar. She was kind of an all-around student and music was her thing. And she wanted to be in the band. So, and she had a clarinet because she was in the band when she left William Penn. And so she got in the band at William Penn--I mean at Ferndale Junior High. And then the band--they had to decide who was going to sit in the first chair, you know, in the clarinet section. And the bandmaster was very--he was just a very smart, intuitive man.

He said, "Okay now. We gonna let the class decide who can play." And he gave both of them a piece of music to play. He said, "Now you go out in the hall and you decide among yourselves who's going to play first and who is going to play second. And we're not going to know who it is. And then when they come back in you decide, you know, who played the best."

And they decided, you know, after they heard them play. They said, "The one who play number--the second one that played is the one that played the best." And that was Brenda. And so she got--and that kind of stuff, you know, you can appreciate that that really is based on quality, you know, on performance, and this kind of thing.

KH: And the band director apparently wanted to eliminate what he thought might be a bias.

SH: Right, right. And you can really, you know, you can really appreciate that. But they had some different experiences. But to show you--one of the counselors told the younger one--you know, the music--the kind of the all-around--that she wasn't college material. And so she came home that day, she said, "Momma, what can a sixteen and seventeen-year-old do to make a living without going to college?"

She said, "What do you mean?"

She said, "The counselor told me that I wasn't college material."

She said, "Look, let me tell you one thing. You are college material. You are going to college and make no mistake about it. Don't ever let anybody else tell you who you are." That's what she used to tell both of the girls all, you know, when they were pioneering, you know.

Now that same girl that was not college material, she graduated from Howard University. She's got a masters in music. She's got a law degree from Seton Hall [University]. They hired her on the law faculty at Seton Hall and she was a visiting professor at North Carolina Central University for a year; she was on sabbatical. Well, no, that was when she got to leave. Then she had a year's leave of sabbatical, and now she's going back to Seton Hall this fall. And they gave her a raise--you know, seventy, seventy-five thousand, you know. This is the girl that was not college material.

And it's so unfortunate because there would be some parents that would just accept what the teachers say, what the counselors say about their children. And this is one of the things that really got me involved in the Black Child Development Institute, what's happening to our kids. Because if they don't have the support at home and if they're depending entirely on what other people say to them, you know, just--it's, it's devastating to the lives of a lot of kids. But then I could get on that for [unclear].

KH: Well, why don't we stop here?

[End of Interview]