GREENSBORO VOICES/GREENSBORO CIVIL RIGHTS ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

INTERVIEWEE: Owen Lewis

INTERIVEWER: William Link

DATE: November 21, 1988

[Begin Tape 1, Side A]

WILLIAM LINK: This is William Link, and the date is November 21, 1988. I'm here with Mr. Owen Lewis. I wonder if you'd mind telling me a little bit about, about yourself: where you were born, when you were born, and your education, educational background?

OWEN LEWIS: My name is Owen Lewis. I live at 2407 Springwood Drive in Greensboro. I was born April 9, 1925, in Winston-Salem, and I was educated in the public schools there and graduated from Reynolds High School in 1942. I went to Moravian College in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, for a year and then I was in the Merchant Marines for three years during World War II. In 1946 to '49 I was at the University [of North Carolina] at Chapel Hill and received a BS degree in business administration in '49. My next real education was at A&T [North Carolina A&T State University], where I attended '70 to '72 and received a master's degree in educational administration in 1973. I attended UNCG [The University of North Carolina at Greensboro] from 1975 to '78 and have educational specialist certification in educational administration and in business and marketing education. Let's see, from--

WL: Sorry, I did not mean to interrupt you. [Knock on the door]

[recorder paused]

WL: Okay, we were talking about your life experiences, your education. I wonder if you could tell me a little bit about when you came back to Winston-Salem after--this would be late 1949, is that right?

OL: Yeah, when I graduated from UNC-Chapel Hill, right.

WL: How would you describe the racial situation in Winston-Salem when you first arrived, back--?

OL: Well, Winston-Salem has a very--a high percentage of black population because of the nature of the industry over there--a lot of seasonal employees in tobacco, a lot of low-skilled jobs in textiles and so forth. So the population of Winston-Salem is nearly half black. And this has always been a town where there was very complete segregation of the races, and I had quite a few experiences with--particularly since I was involved with arts and cultural activities--some black friends were very much discriminated against.

The faculty at Winston-Salem State [University], for instance, were kept under pretty much a separate enclave. And when the desegregation came to the public schools after the *Brown* [*v. Board of Education*] decision of '54, there was considerable unrest in the community. And then as other--as the Civil Rights Act [of 1964] came about and there was desegregation of public facilities, there was considerable resistance to this. And I recall one instance that I was involved in. This was when I was president of the Unitarian Fellowship and we decided that we would lead a, more or less a peaceful demonstration.

WL: When was this?

OL: This was probably about, I guess, about 1961 or '62. The group went to the Reynolds Park Pool, because there was--the town was about to close this public pool, because there was not a--nobody was using the pool since it was desegregated. So we took an interracial group out there to go swimming, and we got a lot of media attention. And we went down to the [Winston-Salem] Board of Aldermen meeting to plead with them to keep the pool open, which they did, so we were successful in that. And I had always been interested in the civil rights and had been active through the church and through various organizations.

WL: Do--let me interrupt. Was there a--[did] Unitarians have much support among other churches, other white churches, or were you pretty much by yourself in Winston-Salem?

OL: No, there were other liberal ministers in other denominations. We had Tom Frazier, who was the minister at the Episcopal church and later became a bishop, was quite liberal on these issues. Bill Gramley[?], who was a Moravian minister, was very strong on civil rights and also on peace issues. And the Quakers were very much involved in this also. And during the same time that I was involved with the Unitarians I was involved with the Quakers. The American Friends Service Committee national headquarters is in High Point, and I served on two of their regional committees: one on desegregation of the public schools, and one on equal employment opportunities. And they had paid staff who

were working on these issues. So I'd say that the Unitarians, the Quakers, the Episcopalians, and to some extent the Jews and certain Presbyterian churches were involved in this.

And there were even liberal Baptists. For instance, [W.W.] Bill Finlator, who was the pastor at Pullen Park [Memorial] Baptist Church in Raleigh, he and I were among the founders of the North Carolinians Against the Death Penalty. And, of course, that is a racial issue, too. There's a lot of racial connotations to it. And Finlator was one of those in the forefront of the civil rights movement in the--

WL: Earlier?

OL: --even though he was a Baptist. So it was not just a Unitarian thing. In fact, the Unitarians are a very tiny denomination, so their influence really wasn't all that great. I think probably the Quakers and the Episcopalians and some of the others really had more influence and more substance to it--their support of the movement--than did the Unitarians.

WL: Now, you mentioned--going back to the 1950s, before we get into the 1960s--you mentioned that there was a great deal of unrest that encircled the *Brown* decision, or came as a result of the *Brown* decision of 1954. Was this unrest on the part of whites, or unrest on the part of blacks, and what would be some manifestations of that unrest?

OL: Well, when the first student was brought in to the--to a previously all-white school, they had to have police protection, and of course, there were a lot of racial slurs and epithets and so on directed at her.

WL: How did the school, how did the school board respond to *Brown*?

OL: The school board in both Winston-Salem and Greensboro actively supported it. And Craig Phillips, who was later a state superintendent of public instruction, was superintendent in Winston-Salem, and he very strongly supported that decision. And so did Ben Smith. Ben L. Smith was superintendent in Greensboro. He strongly supported it. Richardson Preyer was the superior court judge here and he issued a ruling in a case against the group called the Patriots, and so a lot of this was directed, a lot of this racial unrest was addressed--directed against him. They burned a cross on Ben Smith's lawn and this type of thing. So the Klan was fairly active back then. And they were, I think, more numerous and more vocal than they are today.

WL: Do we know much about who the Klan were? I mean, where they, were they located in--were there Klansmen in Winston-Salem?

OL: Oh yeah, there were Klansmen in Winston-Salem and there were Klansmen in Greensboro. And when I was on the newspaper in Greensboro I had occasion to talk to these people and interview them. They're really pretty much uneducated--well, I don't know what the current name would be, redneck, I guess. Not a very desirable element of society. But the Grand Klud, for instance, who was the chaplain, was an unemployed house painter. This type of thing is what you ran into. There was quite a bit of activity by these people. They were vocal.

WL: And that activity was directed against any sort of compliance with the *Brown* decision, or any indication of desegregating and so on?

OL: That's right.

WL: What about the black community? I mean, how did blacks, do you think, respond?

OL: Well, at that time, it was back in the fifties, there wasn't too much overt response from the blacks. The black community didn't really get active until much later. Now what objections and demonstrations and so forth that came about during that, during the period of the fifties were entirely peaceful, if they were held at all. And a lot of it centered on the church. You had an active NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] chapter, which--in Winston-Salem, and they had a somewhat active one in Greensboro.

WL: Winston was more active than Greensboro, you think? Stronger?

OL: Right. And Charlotte was the strongest of all. That's where Kelly Alexander, who was the head of the state NAACP, lived. And so that was about the only formal organization that you had. And I attended, when I was with the newspaper, one of--a state NAACP convention that was held in Greensboro. These people were very vocal and they were very articulate in their opposition, but they were not doing anything in the way of actively demonstrating at that point in time.

WL: What was their strategy at that point? This would be in the late fifties?

OL: Yeah. At that point, as I say, they were just trying to work through the church, and through the community, and through the existing organizations, and through the legal system. They were not, shall I say, clawing the law at this point.

WL: Yeah. Was there much attempt or much effort on the part of white liberals and black opponents of segregation to get together in the fifties? Was there much interracial cooperation going on in Winston?

OL: Yeah. I mentioned the group that we got together for the thing with the swimming pool, and this included--the white couples were either Unitarian or Episcopalian, and the black couples were people who were, well, associated with Winston-Salem State. One of them--one person was a physician, another woman there was later head of the Community Action Program, and so forth. It was a small, elite, you might say the better educated, more cultured individuals from both--

WL: Both classes?

OL: Yeah, from--both the whites and the blacks were the people who were involved with the educational institutions and the cultural activities of the community. I don't think there was any great broad-based support for the cooperative efforts.

WL: How did this group get together? I mean, do you remember how, how did the white members make contact with the black members?

OL: Well, we had regular contact with these people through the cultural institutions, in other words[?], through the artists' groups, and the drama groups, and the film groups, things like that.

WL: Those were integrated?

OL: Yes, yes.

WL: So you did have integration there in the fifties?

OL: Yes. And Winston-Salem was a leader. In fact, I think that they had the second Arts Council in North America. The first one was in Vancouver, and this goes back to about 1949 or something like that. So they've had very heavy cultural involvement. And all those activities from their inception were integrated.

WL: That's interesting. So you had a--you had fairly wide-ranging opportunities for blacks and whites to make that kind of contact.

OL: Yeah. Right.

WL: To associate. What about--what's going on in the schools in Winston-Salem is that you have the *Brown* decision in 1954. Is there much that happens? Does it get--much change?

OL: Well, what happened is that the schools in Winston-Salem later ran into a massive busing situation just as we did here. I can tell you a lot more about Greensboro schools than I can Winston-Salem, because I was here when most of that happened.

I can tell you that the Winston-Salem schools went through an elaborate cross-busing thing, and since they were a consolidated system, this involved county-wide busing. So they ended up getting much more integrated than we did here, because here in Guilford County we've got three school systems. You've got two city systems [Greensboro and High Point] with heavy concentration of blacks and very good integration. And then you've got the suburban, rural, county system, which even to this day is not very well integrated, mainly because there aren't that many blacks in the district, you see.

But Greensboro was under court order. First they went with the "freedom of choice" plan. And then they got into administrative enforcement proceedings with the Department of Health, Education and Welfare, and there was an unfavorable ruling. And then a case was brought in United States District Court and that went against them. And so they were forced to change from the freedom of choice plan to the cross-busing situation. Schools were paired and kids were sent from one end of town to the other.

But you see, that wouldn't have had the kind of impact that it did in the county-wide system. In other words, the busing wasn't nearly so long, the bus rides were not nearly so long. Some of those black kids in Forsyth County had to go fifteen or twenty miles to school. In Greensboro, of course, the--well, being with the city district, it didn't have quite that impact on them. But both systems have been declared unitary systems and they are in compliance.

WL: Going back to the, just back to the 1950s, Winston-Salem went with the freedom of choice plan--this would have been while you were there in Winston-Salem. How well did that work? I mean, to what extent did it fail while you were there? Did you have any--

OL: Well, it didn't work very well at all, either there or here, because, you see, when you have the--people are left to their own devices, you're not providing transportation for them, there's not much opportunity to go to the other schools. And so it's not really their free choice when you don't give them the transportation to get them there. So what you ended up with was token desegregation in both systems, in both the Forsyth system and the Greensboro system.

WL: Let me ask you another, just another question about what was going in the fifties, related to what's going in the fifties. To what extent was there much evidence of testing the

segregated system that existed in Winston-Salem? To what extent was there testing the limits of that system during the fifties? In other words, my question has to do with to what extent did the people try to break down the laws of local ordinances that required public segregation?

OL: Of course, you know that all started here in Greensboro in 1960 with the sit-ins at the Woolworth's lunch counter.

WL: Right. In Winston-Salem?

OL: In Winston-Salem, there was not as much, or nor as concerted activity, but there was an attempt to desegregate the K&W cafeteria over there. And it was not successful at all.

WL: What year was that?

OL: This was about '61. And the--nothing happened in terms of desegregation of public facilities to amount to anything until the Civil Rights Act of--I guess that was about '64. It had to be done by law over there.

As I say, Winston-Salem comes from a much deeper tradition of segregation than they had here in Greensboro, because the people in Winston-Salem were closer to the rural attitudes [activities?] and to the factory life and so forth. It was, it was kind of a two-tier system, you didn't have much of a middle class over there. It was the haves and the have-nots. And there was not much desire--or, well, I wouldn't say desire, but there wasn't much, there was not really much in the way of attempt on the part of black people who would test it over there like they did in Greensboro. I think they--

WL: So they weren't organized as well?

OL: That's right, when it came to things like that. Of course, the base of organization here came from A&T and the people associated with it. A&T is a much larger and more influential institution, and the--you have a more paternalistic society going in Winston-Salem also, because they have, the town's pretty well controlled by the leaders of a few small industries. A small number of people and a few large industries, Reynolds [R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Company] and Hanes, and things like that.

WL: More so than Greensboro?

OL: Yes.

WL: More of a small group.

OL: Greensboro is a much more diverse city and has a much larger middle class.

WL: But, and yet Winston had a stronger NAACP.

OL: Yes.

WL: Of course, the NAACP wasn't interested in this kind of testing. It was more interested in legal testing.

OL: That's right. And it's also concerned with economic concerns. I think they did a lot with that. Then you had a very strong Urban League over there that was very influential in getting better employment opportunities, better wages and working conditions and so forth. That seemed to be the big concern in Winston-Salem, whereas the social concerns were more predominant here in Greensboro.

WL: There had been for a long time a large percentage of black workers in the tobacco factories.

OL: Yes, that's what I said. All the seasonal workers, for instance, in what they called the leaf houses over there were all black people. And there was an awful lot of unskilled and semi-skilled jobs in those factories over there which had been traditionally held by, almost exclusively by blacks.

WL: Yeah. What, was there sort of a job hierarchy in which the more skilled positions tended to be white?

OL: Yeah, it seemed to be that way. In fact, the industries looked more for whites, too.

WL: Such as textiles?

OL: Yeah, the textiles. The textile industry employed more white people and they mainly used the black people for custodial jobs and maintenance jobs, things like that. The production line workers were mostly white. In tobacco, you see, there was a tremendous number of black people in the seasonal work. And then, as I said, there were an awful lot of itinerant, I guess you call them migrant now, agricultural workers, most of whom were black, too, and a lot of sharecroppers and this sort of thing. So when you come out of this rural society, you come up with that tradition.

WL: Yeah. And you think having a larger percentage of black population, a larger percentage of the population being black, a certain psychology, I guess, there?

OL: Yeah, I would say when I was growing up that Winston-Salem was probably well over 40 percent black, and probably around 45 percent or something like that, whereas Greensboro was more like 30 percent. It makes a difference.

WL: Yeah. A certain psychology of race relations. Now you came to Greensboro in what year?

OL: Well, I went to work here in 1962, but as I said about that[?], and I didn't actually move here till 1967 after I finished the year at Chapel Hill. Of course, I commuted from Winston-Salem there for a while.

WL: What were your--when you first came to Greensboro, maybe, before you moved here formally, what were your impressions of the, of race relations in the city?

OL: Well, I thought the race, race relations were more advanced here than they had been in Winston-Salem, that they'd made better adjustment to the issues of desegregation. But in 1963, we were hit with these massive demonstrations, and we were--I was very much involved with that, because I worked for the newspaper. And there we had the hundreds of people marching and holding mass meetings and so forth. And Jesse Jackson was very much involved with this. He was president of the student body at A&T, and he's usually given credit for being the leader of the thing.

But the real leader and the real brains of the outfit was Tony Stanley, who's--[A.] Knighton Stanley, Jr.--who was the chaplain over there at A&T, and he really called the shots. I met with Jesse Jackson frequently during that time. And there was a headquarters at the Church of the Redeemer on East Market Street. I used to go over there almost on a daily basis. And I established a pretty good rapport with these people. I was one of the few reporters that they would allow into the strategy sessions and into their--some of their mass meetings they barred the media, but yet, Tony Stanley would always get me right up to the front.

WL: So you were present during the strategy and the important mass meetings?

OL: Yes.

WL: What sort of attitude did they have toward the media, generally? This is a media-oriented movement, obviously, I mean the use of the media--

OL: They wanted to use it to their advantage, but they were frustrated because they felt like the media was working against them, and they didn't feel like they were getting a fair shake. But, as I say, that--I was one of the few people that they really trusted, because they felt like I was doing a fair job of reporting.

WL: How would you report the meetings? Just in a straight-forward kind of way?

OL: As objectively as I could. That was my job. I think that maybe some of the other people were letting their own biases get into it. But at that time, you see, most of the reporters on the newspaper were, shall we say, mature white men, usually guys who--at least that's the way it was on the *Greensboro Daily News*. The average age of the reporters was probably about forty, and they were, they were products of a culture that didn't look too kindly on desegregation and this type of thing. And so I think maybe they let their biases show sometimes.

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

WL: We were talking about the, about the--your role in 1963, and about the media in general in Greensboro and its attitude toward, toward the civil rights activists. I'm very interested in what you have to say there. What, would you say--were there major differences, say, in the attitude of print media versus the radio and television media? How did they cover it? How did radio and television cover it? Do you remember?

OL: Well, of course, we all covered it. There was not very good cooperation among the media back then. The people in the print media always resented the people from the electronic media coming in, because they had so much equipment and all those bright lights and everything and kind of--this seemed to cause people to put on a performance and sort of distorted the events to meet the demands or the opportunities of the media. So their attitude towards the different media would--depended in part on, on how the particular reporters dealt with the situation.

And I would say that there were more sympathetic with the newspaper than there were with the television, because the television people tended to be more sensational. They tended to sensationalize the news more than the print media did. And a lot of times this was unfavorable to the demonstrators. Well, some--then, there was also the fact that sometimes the media people got involved in these demonstrations as victims. I recall one photographer getting hit over the head by a demonstrator--a television photographer, I mean. It put a massive gash in his head.

WL: Why was that? What was the--what caused the incident?

OL: This was during the nine--this was about 1969, with the demonstrations down at Dudley and--Dudley High School and at A&T. And he had done nothing really to provoke anybody. It was just that he was there, and they were just lashing out because they didn't like what had run on Channel 2 the night before. So it was, it was old "kill the messenger" syndrome, I guess.

WL: Was, was Jackson's leadership--you feel it's been sort of overestimated.

OL: Yeah, well, of course, Jesse's got an awful lot of charisma. He's a--he had a very strong ego. He was a regular megalomaniac, at least he was back then. I think he's calmed down a little bit as he's gotten older and more mature. But he, he was the rallying point for the thing. As I said, the real strategy, I think, came from Tony Stanley, and another professor at A&T whose name I can't remember now. But I do remember going to some sessions at his house with Stanley and Jackson. I remember we'd sit around sipping Canadian Club Whisky, which I thought was kind of funny with two reverends involved there.

WL: What was the strategy--how did the strategy--did the strategy change--since you, you were privy to the strategy meetings and the mass meetings? Did, did the activists have a plan in the beginning and they followed that plan straight forward through?

OL: To a point. Of course, some things had to be altered to fit the day-to-day changes that occurred. They had certain goals, but if those goals were reached, then you had to set other goals, and if they weren't reached maybe you had to shorten the goal. But overall I'd say they persevered and stayed pretty much on target. It takes a, it takes a long time and a lot of work and a lot of hardship to pull this thing off. And I think those people really had dedication. They went out in all kinds of weather and withstood all kinds of verbal abuse--and sometimes physical. The law enforcement people, I think, were bent over backwards trying to be fair and treat the people with respect and dignity and so forth.

WL: What was the relationship between, say, someone like Jackson and the law enforcement?

OL: Well, I've got this picture that I just pulled out for this seminar of Jesse Jackson with [Greensboro police] Captain Bill Jackson, and they have a pretty good mutual admiration going there. Jesse respected Bill for what he was--had to do, and Bill respected Jesse because he thought that he was a person of good morals and ethics and a worthwhile human being. I feel like they did what they, they did what they had to do, and they were as unobtrusive about it as possible except when things really got out of hand. And then at one point, for instance, they had to call out the National Guard. That was during 1969. We were really, at that point, in a state of martial law. It was really bad news. Until things

escalated to that point, I think that they did the best they could to keep the peace and keep the institutions open and viable and so forth.

WL: Did Greensboro communities--let's say the white community-- have much indication this was coming? I mean, the events that are taking place in the outside world, I suppose, had a lot to do with Greensboro. The Birmingham demonstrations sort of set off Greensboro in a sense, didn't they?

OL: One institution that was prominent in all of this was the [Greensboro] Chamber of Commerce. It's not usual to see the chamber of commerce involved in social issues. But there was a guy named Hal Sieber who was, well, I guess the PR [Public Relations] man for the chamber, and he was actively involved in the building of better race relations. Sieber's still around. He married a wealthy black widow, and he's got a little PR business, I think, that he piddles at. But Sieber was always on the spot trying to find out what was going on, and you know, getting people together to meet and so forth. He was very active in that. You had leaders on both sides, among the whites and the blacks, that were actively involved in keeping things going and keeping people together.

WL: How did white leaders in Greensboro as a whole react, do you think, to 1963? Were they, were there some of them that were willing to bring change, or some who didn't?

OL: Yeah. The biggest hold-out on the thing was Boyd Morris, who ran the Mayfair Cafeteria, which was concentrated on. Of course, Morris behaved like an unreconstructed redneck. I had some experience with him. I was hanging exhibits, and they have a thing called the Mayfair Suburban Cafeteria, and I worked out a deal with Eddie Benjamin that owned the Starmount Company to hang these pictures out there every month. And he--the guy would not allow me to hang a picture of a black person. [laughs]

WL: Oh, really? [laughs]

OL: Paintings of a black person, I'll tell you.

WL: He was segregated--he wanted it, wanted it done segregated?

OL: He also didn't like, didn't want any nudes, and he didn't want anything very abstract. I thought it was a little much. For instance, at one sale I had a, sort of a--almost a portrait of an old black guy smoking a pipe. There was nothing offensive about it at all. It was just a character study, more or less. He didn't want that--that came back, "We don't have no pictures of no niggers in my restaurant."

WL: Did he, is that why they chose Boyd Morris to focus on, because he--

OL: I wouldn't be surprised. The Mayfair Cafeteria was kind of a community institution, too, in that the civic clubs met there. And so that may have been another reason it was targeted. All the city clubs were all-white, too, you know. So, a little bit of a bastion of whiteness, you might say.

WL: Yeah. They targeted Mayfair, and they targeted movie theatres as well. Is that right?

OL: Right.

WL: All the downtown movie theatres, pretty much?

OL: That's right.

WL: And the strategy there was to focus on the downtown and focus on these concentrated centers?

OL: Yeah, right. It's like--well, the very first one was the Woolworth's lunch counter. It was about the first of February, 1960, when that took place, and they kept going back there on a daily basis. Not necessarily the same guys, but a contingent would come back there every day and sit there. And they finally got served. And that's what I mean by the perseverance that they had and the dedication. It was very true all the way through the thing.

WL: Was there much--there must have been a good bit of hostility expressed toward the demonstrators.

OL: Yes, there was. And this clan of people that got into the act, too, that came down [unclear].

WL: The police presumably were concerned about that.

OL: Oh, yeah, they were [unclear].

WL: How do you think Greensboro handled the situation on balance in 1963? Did they, did they--

OL: I thought they handled it very well. It was a thing that could have really gotten out of hand, because I remember the first demonstration, the first night of the demonstrations.

One of my jobs was to count the demonstrators, and there were over eight hundred people walked by me on East Market Street. And of course, when they got around to where they sat down in the street, they were all arrested and they put them into school buses, or recreation department buses, some kind of buses anyway, and took them off to the coliseum. [The police department] used the coliseum to book all these people.

It could have been a real bad situation if they hadn't handled it with the finesse that they did, and so I give them a lot of credit on that. I think that the town leadership, the mayor, the city council, the chamber of commerce, all the real leaders of the community, I think, were behaved in a very responsible way. Same thing with the schools. I think that they had a very strong superintendent of schools, Bill Weaver, during that period. A very enlightened school board. I think they acted very responsibly and very wisely on all this stuff.

WL: Of course, in 1963 it did take, it did take all this pressure to get change. And Boyd Morris wasn't alone. It was other--

OL: Oh, absolutely. But I just mentioned him as one that sticks in my mind as being adamant about there not being any desegregation.

WL: But the downtown merchants as a whole were very reluctant.

OL: Right, right. And they could just as well have gone over to the S&W [Cafeteria], which they did before it was over with. And the manager over there was just as adamant as Boyd was. He just wasn't quite as vocal about it.

WL: A few years ago I interviewed Boyd Morris for this project, and his position was that he was a scapegoat, that everybody else wanted him to integrate, but they weren't willing to integrate at the same time.

OL: No, that's what I'm saying. See, he's a former mayor and so forth. He was just in the wrong place at the wrong time.

WL: Yes, because, of course, his business went down the drain after that I suppose.

OL: Yeah.

WL: What kind of--let's talk a little bit about the black participation in the movement in 1963, the people participating. You've talked about the leaders, that most of them came right out of A&T, I gather. What sort of--

OL: And also the ministers.

WL: Strong ministerial backing?

OL: Right. As I said, the Church of the Redeemer and this Episcopal church is where they had their headquarters [Trinity AME Zion]. There were other ministers involved, too, that were very active, like Otis Hairston from Shiloh [Baptist Church] and others. So even participation included churches. A lot of the strategy sessions I'm talking about were held at various churches. The church was essentially the center of the movement, and most of the community support came through the church. That is, the black community support was generated through the churches.

WL: The churches mobilized support.

OL: Right.

WL: Got the numbers out, I guess.

OL: Right.

WL: They did get significant numbers of people in these marches. We're talking about several thousand.

OL: Yeah, I said the first, the very first one they did, they had over eight hundred people, 'cause I counted one by one as they walked down the street, and it got bigger than that before it was over with. They had thousands of people out there. One night there was a demonstration outside the jail when Jesse Jackson was locked up through the night, and all these people out there singing. Course, that was part of every demonstration, was singing freedom songs and hymns and so forth.

WL: How--to what degree of training did the demonstrators go through? Were they--they were obviously well disciplined.

OL: Yeah, right. That's what these sessions were that I talked about in these churches. They were indoctrinated in how to conduct a peaceful demonstration. You know, this is passive resistance. This was not an overt, overtly hostile situation on an aggressive plane, only passive resistance.

WL: The whole non-violent strategy, which came, Martin Luther King promoted in Birmingham earlier.

OL: See, these people, some of them, were close to Dr. King and [Ralph] Abernathy [executive of Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC)] and all the rest.

WL: Were there lines of communication between King and--

OL: Yes. Yes.

WL: How so? People that were organizers would come from King's operation?

OL: Yeah, there was a regular exchange of people coming up here from Atlanta and going from here down to Atlanta. This seminar that we're doing next week--not next week, that we're doing in January, we're going, they're going to take a bus down to Atlanta one day and meet with the people there about [unclear] the leaders of [unclear] Greensboro, Durham, and Charlotte.

WL: How do you think Greensboro compares with others in this particular historical episode in 1963, the mass demonstrations? How do you think Greensboro compares to the rest of North Carolina? You've mentioned you thought Greensboro was more, when you first came here, was more adaptable and more receptive to change than, say, Winston-Salem. How would you, I mean comparatively speaking, how does Greensboro fit in?

OL: Well, I mentioned these three cities--Greensboro, Durham, and Charlotte--as being the focus of the civil rights movement in North Carolina. And I think that Greensboro probably handled it as well or better than the other two, in terms of the response to it. I, I would say that it was very well done here on both sides. I think that the demonstrators and the participants were very responsible, and I think the response was moderate and appropriate.

WL: What happens once the demonstrations subside and the city government goes along with--Schenck makes his--Mayor [David] Schenck makes his fairly dramatic, as you recall, statement endorsing desegregation in public accommodations? To what extent does the rest of the downtown go along with desegregation between that point and the Civil Rights Act of 1964? Do you remember? How does it happen?

OL: It was an individual type of thing. Some of them really did mean it. Others just paid lip service to it. It was a long time really happening.

WL: So in a sense it's not fully accomplished until you get the federal government saying, "This has to be done."

OL: That's what I remember. You've still got elements of segregation in our society. I mean, the churches are still basically segregated, the funeral homes, and a lot of clubs and organizations that still--on both sides. There's all-black outfits, and there are all-white outfits, and I don't know if that'll ever go away.

WL: But specifically public accommodations, which is what people were talking about in 1963, did that all happen very quickly?

OL: No, it didn't happen real quickly. You know, it was piecemeal over time. As I say, some people jumped at it right away, and others had to be coaxed and urged and reminded quite a few times before they got around to it. And there were still other cases that came up and minor incidents and demonstrations and things that occurred after the big initial push was over.

WL: Yeah. So progress was very slow, basically?

OL: Yes, very. I mean, we're talking about stuff that happened twenty or more years ago, and it's still not fully accomplished.

WL: Sure. What's the, the mood of--you had, since you had extensive contacts with civil rights activists--what was their mood after the demonstrations of 1963? Was there--there was obviously a sense of victory. I mean, where--what sorts of things were they saying about where they were going to do, going to go next, after--

OL: Well, I think the big push beyond the social issues was in the economic concerns. That was really where the leadership was trying to take them, was into the economic--

WL: They were talking about that at that point?

OL: Yeah, right. And I remember this preacher at one of the NAACP meetings saying that, "There's all that milk and honey in heaven, but what our people need is the collard greens and the black-eyed peas right now." And he talked about your black power, "it's green power that really pays off." Things like that that they were [unclear]. And they talked about mobilizing their economic strength in terms of boycotts, things like that.

And also, attacking equal opportunity, equal employment opportunities was another objective. And the various professions--why don't we have more blacks in this one or that one? School admissions, and getting money for programs in the schools. I think the economic or financial concerns are what replaced the social concerns. And they were talking also not so much anymore about civil rights, but about human rights in a

broader sense. I think that was another change that took place after the immediate civil rights goals had been achieved.

WL: Was there--we tend, when we look at 1963, we tend to see, of course, a broad kind of unity in the black community, and black activists were indeed very united. But in your experience with, close experience with black leadership, did you detect any dissention or any differences that might later on appear more prominently?

OL: Oh yes, definitely. You had blacks that were more conservative--some of our compatriots might call them Uncle Toms. But there was always an element that didn't want to move quite so rapidly. Then there was, on the other extreme, there were people who wanted to move too rapidly, a lot of them associated with Communist causes and things like that.

WL: Such as?

OL: Well, you take Nelson Johnson, for instance--

WL: Oh, yes.

OL: --as a good example of that. Of course, Nelson now has gone totally respectable, and he's the youth minister at Shiloh Baptist Church, assistant pastor or something, and got a seminary education. But that was the type of distribution that you had. So it was never a totally unified thing, and it still, still isn't. I mean, you've got diverging viewpoints. But I think they hung together enough to get accomplished what they set out to do. I think they were pretty successful in that. And you had some strong leaders that exerted a very cohesive influence on them.

WL: Was there generational differences, I mean, say, between young, younger--

OL: Yes, that was definitely a factor. And the NAACP and the Urban League and so forth represented the, you might say, the older generation, and the younger generation came up with a lot of other organizations like SOBU--Students Organized for Black Unity--and Malcolm X University that Howard Fuller established in Durham. So you had--during that time we also had CORE, Congress of the Organization of Racial Equality. The labor movement enters into this thing, too. Various labor unions got involved in this, particularly those that had a large black membership. They were actively involved in this. So each of these groups came from a--with a different agenda. But as I said, they managed to keep it together enough to achieve the objectives they set out for.

WL: But, subsequent to that, they do begin to see strains.

OL: Right, right.

WL: Especially once you enter the more difficult questions of economics and how to solve their problems[?].

OL: Right.

WL: Nineteen sixty-nine is not a good year for race relations in Greensboro. [unclear]. How did it suddenly happen this way in Greensboro in 1969? What--it seems to come out of nowhere, at least from afar.

OL: Well, there was an article in the *Wall Street Journal* in the spring of ’69 when all of this was happening, telling about how this national organization of militant black students was taking the strategies of--what do you call it--protest that had been successful at the college level and taking them down to the high school level. And a lot of the people who were involved in the massive demonstrations in the spring of 1969, they’d come into Greensboro from other places. They’d come from places like Dartmouth [College], University of Connecticut.

And this is documented not only in the *Journal* article but also by police records from people that were arrested in connection with this thing. So it didn’t just come out of nowhere. It was a planned-type thing. And when they had this incident on the Dudley High School campus, then all these students from A&T--there were about seventy-five of them--came on the campus. And some of these people in that group, they were part of this out-of-town group that we’re talking about, and they were coaching the high school kids on how to pull off their demonstration. Of course--

[End of Interview]