GREENSBORO VOICES/GREENSBORO CIVIL RIGHTS ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

INTERVIEWEE: E.S. “Jim” Melvin

INTERVIEWER: William Link

DATE: November 18, 1987

[Tape 1, Side A]

WILLIAM LINK: This is William Link and we are in Greensboro, North Carolina, and the date is November 18, 1987, and we’re here with Mr. Jim Melvin. I wonder if you could tell me, Mr. Melvin, to begin with, where you were born and when you were born.

JIM MELVIN: I was born here in Greensboro in December 1933. Spent my entire life here, grew up on Asheboro Street, in front of Gillespie Park School, moved only two blocks up until the time I was a senior in high school, then moved about four miles south of town on a small farm. I spent my entire life in Greensboro except for four years in Chapel Hill [UNC-Chapel Hill] and two years in the army. I spent my entire work career in Greensboro, having gone to work for NCNB [North Carolina National Bank] in 1959 and been in the banking business since that time.

WL: I wonder, excuse me, if you’d mind saying something about your memories of the relationships between blacks and whites when you were a child and an adolescent.

JM: Well, of course, I grew up in a neighborhood that was biracial and that we used to have playmates that were--you know we were interracial, played a lot of sports together, against each other. I did a lot of caddying at the Gillespie Golf Course, which was across the street from our house. I had a lot of friends who--I still have lots friends that I grew up with in that capacity, working in my father’s service station every summer and every Saturday. Worked with and for an interracial situation.

WL: Were there many black customers that came?

JM: Oh yeah, I’d say at least 30 to 40 percent of my father’s customer base were minorities. We just spent little or no time talking about that kind of thing. We, as the neighborhood transitioned in south Greensboro from a predominately white neighborhood to an all

black neighborhood, I think we were the last family to leave. My father's business was--in fact, it's still there--but he made no effort to move; we made no efforts to be with flight [white flight]. We hated to see the neighborhood sort of split up, but you know, that's life.

WL: How would you, as a gas station owner, how would you characterize your father's relationships with blacks?

JM: My dad was a unique guy. He liked you and respected you for what you were. He didn't really see a lot of differences. He had a great deal of respect from a lot of people and he was killed, unfortunately, in a holdup of his station, in 1972, to be exact. But you know, I didn't see that as a racial situation; I saw that as really, as just a violent crime related to drugs. The two young boys who did the crime I think were involved heavily with drugs. But here again my reaction was not to see that as a racial situation, did not. I think that was because of my upbringing.

So when I--you know, I have to say that I think one of the things in this whole thing of civil rights is the perception, and that I think that there are just too many people [who think] because you're white or Caucasian and I might be black or a minority, we've got to have some differences. And so are you perceived, so unfortunately a lot of times you end up being. One of my dedications and commitments while serving on the [Greensboro] City Council was to pull this community together through action, not pull it together through various and sundry things, meaning by doing things because they're right, not because you had to or so forth.

I have to say that I left office in 1981 with some disappointment in the fact that there's just a lot of people out there who [think] unless you're a black you can't think like a black or unless you're Caucasian you can't think like a Caucasian. And that, to me, is unfortunate, and that's something we need to work on.

WL: Do you think it's possible to be colorblind?

JM: Oh, I think folks are colorblind. And I think we've made a lot of progress, but I think that there are a lot of folks on both sides of the balance sheet who are still very racist and very segregated.

WL: So, you see evidence of black racism or racists?

JM: Oh absolutely. You see it everyday just as you see Caucasian racism. There's just an awful lot of minority people, and I guess it's understandable, but they can't think as just "what are people's needs, what are the real needs?", they've got to think about black needs and white needs, which I think is really unfortunate.

One of the things the district system vote--and I was an opponent of the district system until I realized that that one question was not that important in the spectrum of history, the scale of history, to keep debating it every two years. I will still say today that the at-large system is the most efficient form of government for this community, meaning that it causes the best quality of people to come to the council table and look at the real problems of this community and take the dollars that they've got to do with it, and spend them where they ought to spend them.

But unfortunately that debate kept coming up every two years and so I changed my opinion my last term in office by saying, "Hey look, it ain't worth the effort. Let's go ahead and get some form of district system in so we can quit debating it and get on with trying to solve the problems facing the community."

WL: So you opposed the district plan on the basis of the fact that it would mean more inefficient government or lower quality of government?

JM: Yeah, and I think in looking back over the last city council election, two or three weeks ago, that in the dissatisfaction that you hear voiced by the community in general, I think this got into the mayor's race--when people feel that something's wrong, but they don't know what it is, but the government is not as responsive as it once was. At least that's what I heard, as I heard the election talk. Nobody got into the district system but I think that has something to do with it.

And the point I was going to make was that one of the--we did some statistical data work, which is something that you ought to always deal with, try to deal with fact rather than perception. But we would show--and the most important thing, I think one of the most important things is at that time the city was spending about seventy, eighty, ninety million bucks a year on running the city. To see where that money was being spent, quite frankly it was being spent where it basically, where it should have been spent, and that's in the neighborhoods that had the needs. The vast majority of it was being spent in the minority areas and in the moderate and lower-income areas, which dispelled the notion that all the public money was being spent in quote "Irving Park." Irving Park has always been singled out--here again it's the perception.

But as I would sit with the minority leadership and I'd say, "All right, now look. I hear what you're saying but look at the facts." They'd say to me, "That don't mean anything to me. Because you don't have 30 percent black representation on that seven person council, it ain't right; you've got to have 30 percent black." You can't argue with that except for the fact that ain't that a racist statement? Pardon the bad English, but you know, they're saying that a white person cannot make the right decision on behalf of a black person and vice versa. I hope a hundred years from now when somebody's listening to this tape that we will have evolved to where that won't make any difference.

WL: Throughout the 1970s, when you were mayor, was it your perception that the black community was dissatisfied to a greater degree or a lesser degree?

JM: I think we've made a lot of progress. You know, for instance, you don't know whether your systems work until they're really tested. And if you'll look at, on November 3, 1979, every system we had was tested because of the shoot-out, which I think was unrelated to the racial relation situation in Greensboro. It was just a senseless criminal act perpetrated on each other by two groups who really sparred until they finally got to the point of fighting. And there's no amount of law enforcement that can keep that kind of thing from happening if two individuals or two groups ultimately want to do each other bodily harm, unless you locked everybody up.

But at that point, every fire that could be fanned was being fanned and, "It was racist." It was predominately black public housing area in the southeast section, there were blacks involved, there were black spectators, there were white people involved with the shooting, and all that kind of thing. So it had all the connotations of a racial incident.

I feel it wasn't racial at all; it was political. It was two diametrically opposed political background groups. If you look at the track of the Communist group, they had been trying to infiltrate the textile mills through union activities. You had doctors, medical doctors working in textile mills trying to organize people; and it wasn't working, so they had changed their strategy to try to make it look like a racial incident to see if they could get minorities to join the Communist Workers Party. There's stuff printed to that [effect], is that was their strategy. You get all kinds of varying degrees, but that was really what it was all about.

And, you know, I've often said to [former City Manager] Tom Osborne that I wished I had the time, or I wish we jointly had the time to write a document on this whole incident. Because, as [radio broadcaster] Paul Harvey would say, "Now you know the rest of the story." I mean, the total story needs to be told, and there's just so much that's been written on one side of the position that I don't think the history books at this point are going clearly say what that incident was all about.

But back to my original point, was that if there had been some real deep-seeded racial problems in Greensboro, we would have had blood in every public street in the city, in my opinion, because there were those opportunities. But then for the best part of a year, we had truly every radical person or group come through here to see if they could get in the spotlight. So we had a lot of folks fanning the fires, too. So I feel that our systems did work. For instance, within minutes--and this is what the '69 incident [at North Carolina A&T State University] taught me--was that we were caught a little short in that incident, in my opinion, for the fact that it took us too long to get to the leadership groups and the total community would say, "All right look, we've got a problem, let's get in there and find out what it is and try to get it solved."

Within minutes of this shooting--the shooting happened at 11:40 [a.m.]--I'll never forget it, I was raking leaves in the front yard. It was A&T homecoming weekend. There was seventeen thousand people who were at the A&T stadium, which was just a couple of blocks away from where the shooting took place, but they had no idea that anything was going on. Most of the black leadership was at that football game or in some way involved with the homecoming activities at the school. But within minutes of the shooting, we had a meeting in the mayor's office. There were about twenty-four or [twenty]-five community leaders saying, "All right, now as best we can tell, here's where we are. Here's what's happening; here's who was involved; here's who was hurt; here's who was killed; here's who we think"--and we'd caught all but one, I think, of those involved on the other side, and he later got caught too. You know, we're going to keep telling you what's going on and what do you think we ought to do? Who do you think we ought to go see? We got the resident councils of the housing projects involved, we got--meaning that it was an emergency and our emergency system worked.

Now, if you look back over that whole year, from the time of the incident to the trial--really you have to go two years, because the first trial ended and then they turned it into a civil suit, so we really had two suits--that the community stayed in touch with itself, there were an awful lot of communications, soul-searching, peace vigils, discussions, focus groups [asking] do we have racial problems? What do we need to do? Lots of folks--it pricked the conscience of a lot of folks.

Frankly, I didn't see any real--you know, if there had really been some and had a lot of the barriers and so forth not been broken down and so forth, I think we would have had some real serious problems. But we didn't. And we went through that whole incident without further incidents, which to me I think is a heck of a story.

You know it's sort of like, a lot of folks say it's sort of like you quit beating your wife; you had this tragic thing happen and the history books will always say that November 3, 1979, Greensboro had this Klan shooting of some Communist Workers Party. They would have liked for it to have said the Klan shooting of some minorities, but it really didn't just turn out that way. There were some minorities involved. But, put this same incident--and this is a question that will be hard to answer--put this same incident in a lot of other communities, there may have been an awful lot of other racial tension and violence, because there is a lot of racial tension and violence in other communities. And I'm not saying that Greensboro doesn't have its racial challenges, it does--I said that earlier, I'll say it again. But, I hope that we can evolve to a day where like I said, "I accept you for what you are." I mean all of us, not just me.

WL: If you were to rewrite--write the history of November 3, 1979, how would you do it, aside from what you've said?

JM: You mean hindsight?

WL: Well, what do you think has been left out?

JM: Well, I just don't think the total communities--you know, how come it happened here, what was the city doing to try to prevent it? See, during the two years of the trials, we were all prohibited from even commenting because of the legal aspect. So, after the two years, the media sort of lost interest in the transaction, so a lot of that stuff has never really been told. What *did* the community do? What *was* the state of race relations in Greensboro at that time?

Now I have to say this to you, too, though: one of my problems with the civil right activist is that it does him, you know--to keep moving forward, he's got to keep putting up a problem, because if there ain't a problem, then he doesn't have a cause. And that my concern with that is that there are many civil right activists that won't ever bring themselves to say that progress has been made. And that we had some leaders--and I was gravely disappointed in George Simkins [president of Greensboro's NAACP chapter] at this point, because in my opinion he had an opportunity to really show some true leadership, which he didn't. He would not leave a football game and come to our meeting at the City Hall after such a tragedy happened; that says something about his leadership. But that he would just immediately--his immediate reaction was [that] Greensboro is a racist city and this was a racist-involved transaction. And I think that leadership on both sides has a real responsibility to surely point out the weaknesses and work like the devil to get them changed. But they also have a responsibility to point to the pride, and there is some pride that there has been progress made.

But I think Greensboro has and continues to make progress. I think if you'll look around through our neighborhoods--most of which are now integrated, substantially--if you look at most of our businesses, most are integrated and substantial. All of your public facilities and everything are, and long since. It's just--folks don't even think about it. But it really is—--it's passé.

Now you know, obviously, there are still lots of racism there, on both sides of the ledger sheet. And progress still needs to be made, and it's something that needs to continue to always--sort of like signing a code of ethics, that you need to renew yourself on that every once in a while, just to remind yourself that you do need to continue to work on it.

WL: One thing that I would like to talk about, the issues you just raised, but before we do that I would like to talk a little bit more about the Klan shooting and ask you about--I suppose one of the criticisms is the fact, I guess the main thrust of the civil suit was the charge that the police department, the Greensboro Police Department, and implicitly the city government, had allowed the shooting to take place. I wonder how you would respond to that.

JM: Yeah, that's just bullcrap. And it's bullcrap perpetrated by those who really wanted to call attention to themselves. And you've got to look at, that's why I say, the whole story needs to be told. That's the very reason for having those demonstrations to start with was publicity. Why were there three TV cameras invited? Four. Why? Who invited them? Communist Workers Party. Television people know that. Why was every major newspaper in the state invited and why were they there? The Communist Workers Party invited them. What is the background of the Communist Workers Party on this thing? They did everything they could to incite the Klan and Nazi people. They called them every name that they could call them. Nelson Johnson stood on the steps of the City Hall on Friday afternoon before the shooting and called them every unmentionable name that you can think. It's public record; there are public reports of it. That to me is inciting whatever it is you incite. Now--

WL: Did the city--

JM: Now let me just finish. We again, to go back to what I was saying, if you and I were really mad at one another and we intended to fight and the city knows about it and it's the city's job to keep me and you from fighting. We had forty-four police officers down there. That's a pretty good detachment, that's 10 percent of the Greensboro Police Department assigned to that one transaction. The Communist Workers Party told our people where they were going to be. Okay. Our people were there. Okay. Now if you're a Communist Workers Party demonstrator and you're seriously looking for protection, where would you be and where would you be with the police department? Is that not a reasonable question? If you wanted to peacefully demonstrate and didn't want anybody--you wanted to call attention to your cause and you didn't want to cause any violence, where would you be? You'd be under the protective cover of those forty-four police officers. But where in fact were they?

Well, a few of them were up spitting on our police officers, I might add, and calling them every name that they could and telling them to get out of the way. While the other contingent were where they had told the press and the media to be, and that was at the front end of Morningside Homes. And the rest is history, that ninety seconds. Now who would ever know? My perception on this is they fully intended to fight. That's why they had on the hardhats and that's why they had the tobacco sticks. And they started beating on these guys and they started beating on their trucks. And I think that was one of the serious mistakes that they made, because they started beating on their vehicles, and to some people, that vehicle is a very precious thing. And it just tripped a sense of violence in these people that they methodically got out and went to their last car--you could see it on television--and got their guns out, and I don't think that the Communists had ever anticipated that there would be any shooting. They did anticipate, I think, that there

would be some fighting. Our people were there within I think eighty-eight seconds, it has been timed.

But, you know, what is the city's responsibility in that--when you've got two groups that are intent on doing violence? You know there will probably be a murder somewhere this month in Greensboro. You could criticize the city that we don't keep that from happening. But I don't believe you can. It was not our movement; I was party to it. I do know that on Friday, the city manager called me and asked if I was going to be in town, and I told him I was. And he said "we anticipate some trouble. We think that we've got it adequately staffed. We are going to be tracking them. We think there may be an attempt on a fight, and that we think we've got that pretty well covered." And I said, "Fine." And that's their job.

I can assure you that one, after being on the council for ten years up to that time--city mayor and on the city council for ten years--I had never heard the word Ku Klux Klan mentioned at any of our meetings, strategy sessions or anything else. And why? Because it was not a concern in Greensboro. You had almost no Klan activity. I think they had some cross burning things before I got on the council and that had to do with--I don't even know the particulars. So you can't say this was a hotbed of Klan activity, and you certainly can't say that any of us involved with the city in any way had any dealings with the Klan people.

You know, there was even the charge that we were in cahoots, you know, which is just ludicrous. I think it's one of the bad raps of all time. The city of Greensboro is probably as nice a place as anybody could live. We've got some weaknesses, but the history of this city from long ago was that we probably get high marks and were facing up to our people relations problems and coming out with the right answer.

You know I get down right incensed that a few hotheads on two sides of a very stupid political question came in here and violated the hell out of our community. I think we've taken an awful lot of bad raps, I've said this on television, national television, international television the night that Ted Koppel asked me that question. He said to me:

"Mr. Mayor, how could you possibly let that happen in your community?" That made me madder than hell. To my knowledge that's one of the few times that after I got through with him, he apologized and said, "Now I understand." And that's public record, it was on the national media.

WL: That was right after the shooting was over?

JM: No that was after the verdict came out.

WL: The first verdict.

JM: When the verdict came out that they were acquitted. And, "Mr. Mayor, how can you let that happen in your city?" Well, here again from the moment that criminal act, or that act, that violent act, happened, our role changed, our role changed to that of public safety—everybody's public safety. And for the next two years we spent over a million dollars extra to protect everybody's rights, to let the criminal justice system work. Now you don't want any elected body or mayor or anybody else going in and saying "you're guilty." You've got to put that into the hands of the criminal justice system and twelve appointed jurors by both sides sit and listen to all the evidence of this thing and then they render a verdict. You're talking about taking the government in your hands.

You know I might have had some strong opinions and perceptions to that thing but I didn't sit through the whole trial. So how could I render a justified verdict and that's what I said to Mr. Koppel. I said, "Mr. Koppel, if you want us to go out and say what we think and enforce the rule, then you're going to break down the very system that runs this country." And that we're proud that this has been allowed to happen under some very adverse circumstances and that nobody else got hurt. And we saw to it that courtroom stayed almost a vacuum and that on both sides of the issue, they could present their case and the twelve jurors rendered a verdict. You may or may not like it, but we've got to live with it unless you want to change the system.

Now to me, that's pretty good civil rights. Now, there's no doubt that those guys killed those people and wounded those people. You know there's no doubt of that. That's a provable fact. I don't guess there's any time in the history of mankind--think of it--where a crime of that magnitude and violence of that magnitude was committed where you had four television cameras running and about a half-dozen reporters on the scene. Think of it. Most violent acts takes place in some dark area or in somebody's home or in some office and nobody ever sees it, so they've got to go back and reconstruct it. And this one--hell, it was out there in front of everybody. Now, as I understand it, the question is, was there incitement. And obviously the jury felt the other way. But I think it was an unjust rap for the community. I think civil rights in Greensboro was reasonably good before this incident and it was, I think, stronger after the incident.

WL: So in that effect it strengthened ties in the community.

JM: I do.

WL: And in the aftermath of the shooting--sort of a community reassessment, the community survives, survived the crisis. How do you--I know this is a different question, but I suppose connected to what you were talking about, and that is, how do you think, how has it been possible that Greensboro has been the scene of so much black activism?

JM: So much black what?

WL: Black activism over the past twenty-five years?

JM: I see it as a positive sign and not a negative sign. I think it says something very good about the community, the fact that A&T State University was here and that you had a group of very intelligent, activist-type minorities and that the injustices of the system were obvious and for all practical purposes it [the sit-in movement] started right here. Rather than there being bloodshed all over the world, that this community handled the sit-ins I think very well. I can't give much input one way or the other because I was really just getting back out of the army, just getting started and just sort of finding out where I was, and all of sudden it was happening. But I think that the leadership on both sides of the issue at that time handled it pretty well.

WL: Does the adjustment in the sixties, really a very radical change in race relations [unclear]--

JM: Well, as I understand it, one, for instance, Greensboro was the first community in the country to get its school systems back out from under the desegregated court order. I think that's proof of some real progress. The fact that we integrated all of our public facilities before it was the 1964 Civil Rights Act, that's something again very positive about the community. I don't--the fact that we were some of the hotbed of the social changes, I don't see that as negative at all. I see that as positive in the fact that we had some perceptive leadership, minority leadership, that pushed the cause.

WL: When you became a member of the city council and later on as mayor, how rapidly does desegregation take place in all areas of life? We talked about some of these things before. For example, in business, was there much of a change that took place over the years say from 1968 to about '81?

JM: Yeah, you know for instance, for two councils we had two out of the seven were black: Vance Chavis and Jimmie Barber. And I know for a fact that we spent the vast majority of our time talking about minority problems. And which is what it should have been, because it was a current issue, it was an evolving issue, it was something that we needed to address ourselves to, and we did. We spent an awful lot of money building community centers, and swimming pools, and tennis courts.

You know one of the things which nobody--I still get excited thinking about the metro sewer plant, because I grew up where 25 percent of this community lived in a very environmentally bad situation. And that is South Buffalo Creek Treatment Plant was built right in the midst of a black community, back when communities didn't have social consciousness about that. And that my first campaign, I ran an ad that said, "Greensboro

stinks." I won a national award, by the way, because everybody read the ad. You know, here I was saying Greensboro stunk. You know, what kind of, "What the hell is this," you know, how brash can you be. I thought long and hard before I okayed the ad. But, what it said was, "Yeah, it does stink." Over 25 percent of the voters in this community every night go to bed and they've got the potential of smelling the sewage from the other 75 percent of the community. We need to do something about it. So that's what the metro sewer plant is all about. That sewer plant now being turned into a park.

Now, nobody will ever say, well, you know the old boys in that '70 to '80 administration were dedicated to seeing that that was done. Probably will never be a time when there will be a bigger municipal project. Sixty million dollars was spent on one project to solve that problem. And nobody calls that improving race relations, but I certainly do. And that the quality of life in that neighborhood is vastly improved. Now, I know my former friends out in McLeansville might say, well, you know, all you did was transfer your problems out here. Now that, to a minor degree, that has been true, and they've had some function problems with that plant and they need, again, to have the same commitment to that neighborhood that we had before, to spend whatever moneys it takes to get that fixed. Now I think they've got most of it fixed.

We didn't come up off that commitment. There were great pressures to spend money in some other areas. You know we could've taken that money and built some more community centers and more streets and more of this. But we said the first term was, "We're going to get that thing built." And we got it built.

And what happened to us, we started building that thing and nobody ever heard of the EPA [Environmental Protection Agency]. And we spent eight years debating where it was going to be, 1500 feet on one side of the stream or the other, which is ridiculous. We had to go out there and be sure that there weren't any arrowheads. It was the biggest bureaucratic mess you've ever seen. We finally just prevailed. Had we not prevailed, you probably wouldn't build it today because there are not any funds.

So, you know I doubt you'll hear many of the black leaders say, "Yeah, that was a great move for race relations," but it really was. In the scale of history--which is what we're talking about--getting that plant out of that southeast section of the city, because that plant was built long before the advanced technology was known. So it, you know, about a hundred days out of a year, it was an intolerable situation. And nobody would have liked to live there.

WL: Another question I have, I guess, is about going back to the earlier violence in Greensboro at A&T that you experienced when you first were on city council.

JM: It was sixty-nine.

WL: Sixty-nine. How would you characterize the response of the whole community, in particular, the city government to those developments?

JM: You know that one was so different, and it was so unusual, and it happened so quickly that I don't think the community gave that one the deep--you know, and I remember Willie Grimes was the young man's name. I'll never forget that name as long as I live. Probably not many folks who remember that. Nobody even knows who shot Willie Grimes. Willie Grimes was killed out there on the yard in between the dorms at A&T.

That was an unusual thing. I remember the decision just like it was yesterday. I was not mayor at the time--Jack Elam was the mayor--but Jack invited me to sit with him in the crisis control center. The National Guard and everybody was there. There had been shots fired out of this dorm all night long, and the police and the National Guard and everybody were surrounding it. I don't mean just every now and then, I mean automatic weapons and everything else.

The decision was made--and Bob Morgan, who was the attorney general at the time, and he was on the scene because he was directing the National Guard--and the decision was made that the only way to get those guys out of there was to storm the dorm. And that was a tough decision. You know to storm the dorm, somebody's probably going to get hurt on one side or the other. So that was a tough decision.

Because you see earlier that night there had been an ambush of five Greensboro police officers. They had been called to answer a supposed incident of violence--something was going on, so they were called to a certain address in that neighborhood. So when they went there, they were set up. They got caught in a crossfire and all five of them got very seriously wounded. You see that was the background of this thing. So there wasn't the--it was quite obvious that there was somebody in that dorm well-armed and well-fortified, really trying to create war. I mean, it wasn't like the Klan shoot-out thing where you have one side who has most of the guns and the other side [doesn't]--and it wasn't out where everybody could see it. It was really an ongoing--lasted for about 24 hours kind of a shoot-out.

And a strange thing happened. By about five o'clock in the morning, they were going to hit the dorm right at daybreak. They went to this dorm, and there wasn't a person--everybody got out through the heating duct, heating tunnel over there. They were gone. No guns, no bullets, no nothing, cleaned it out just like it, just cleaned it up. And yet in the aftermath they found Willie Grimes' body out in the courtyard. Nobody ever knew how he got shot--really a senseless tragedy. He was a student over there. But, you know, what do you do? Who do you send to jail? Who do you criticize?

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

JM: --the fact that the schools themselves did a great deal of restructuring on policies and procedures, and student council elections, student council representation, and all that kind of stuff. But here again, Nelson Johnson was in and around and fanning that thing like crazy. And if you look--and that was in sixty-one. Fifty nine. Is that right? Fifty-nine?

WL: Sixty-nine.

JM: Sixty-nine I mean. All right, then here comes Nelson Johnson back in 1979. It's just, you know [trails off]—

WL: So in a sense, there is a connection between--

JM: Well, you've got to say he was connected to both and that there was violence in both. He is the only person that you can find that was connected with both. So, that's a question that I guess will always be unanswered.

WL: Another question that we can conclude with--I know that maybe you can't answer this, but I would be interested if you could. I wonder if you have any reflections about the role of the federal government in its relations with the city of Greensboro and its impact. And did it have an impact?

JM: Well, I'm not in as good a position to comment on that because simply, you know, the way the council and the administration works, and the way it should work, the council sits as a board of directors. We set the policy and then we turn it over to the city manager and all the staff to do the administrative things with running the company, so to speak. Now I get a little cloudy myself with all the federal agencies that have jurisdiction over and above and beyond. And you know it really got sort of confusing because they had all kinds of informants and everything else involved in both groups--the tobacco, alcohol, firearms people [Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms], you had your SBI [State Bureau of Investigation] folks, you had your FBI folks. You had your--you know it really got a little confusing on everybody's part.

As I think back, I think even some of our folks were a little surprised to find that the federal government knew as much about what was going on as they did without telling our folks, which is--but here again, I guess if I knew more about how these agencies worked that that might be more understanding. That it might be best that they not tell the local law enforcement agencies about these situations until there was a real need to. But in hindsight, it probably would have been to everybody's advantage if they shared it.

But I'll say this. We, as elected policy-makers for the City of Greensboro, did not know 99 percent of this. We just knew that there was a couple of--there was a group of

folks, small in number, about twelve in total--that's the Communist Workers Party--that were going around the state saying some rather nasty things about some other people. Darg [Greensboro FBI agent Dargan Frierson], I think, got involved.

WL: But there wasn't in general a lot of communication between the federal programs, FBI--

JM: Well, I never will forget the day of the shooting. The city manager was up in his home in Sparta, North Carolina, where he was born and raised. And, as I say, I was down here in my leaf clothes not knowing that within an hour I was going to be called on to be a spokesman for this community in a world incident. I mean, it got fanned into being a world incident.

The opening salvo was from a reporter from the AP [Associated Press]. Never will forget seeing the guy's face, as clearly as I do your's, right now. He asked the chief of police a very piercing question. And I could tell that the chief of police was about ready to lose it. I don't mean that negatively, I could just tell that, you know, he had just about had it with this guy and he was about ready to lose it. So I tapped him on the shoulder and I said, "Chief, let me answer that." So I said, "Sir, it's obvious from your question that you don't live in Greensboro, because our police department has a day-in and day-out record of being one of the best in this country." And it did and it still does. And that "It has a race relations and a human relations and a sensitivity and a track record of getting at the facts and getting something resolved and keeping crime down." And I said, "Beyond most standards." And I said, "And they're going to do the same kind of job on this thing."

And I said, "About an hour and forty minutes ago there was a war out here. And that's what it was. It didn't last but about sixty seconds, but it was a war. And in a war there ain't no rules, and that a lot of stuff happened that day in about sixty seconds. Now, our role, right now, is to first of all find out what it was, and turn that over to the criminal justice department section of our system. And we're going to give you every fact we've got; we ain't going to disclose a thing."

And that was one of the things I think disarmed them, because we had a press conference through that first two and half, three days. And at one point we had over five hundred media people. Think of it. This was an international, big-time event. We had a press conference about every four hours. We'd tell them everything we'd found out since the last press conference. I mean everything. That really--they had a hard time handling it, because they'd been used to dealing with agencies that were very protective of themselves. Maybe in hindsight, we should have been more protective. But we said to these guys, "Look, we're going to tell it to you at the same way we got it. If we did something wrong out there, we're going to admit it." And I think, as the history book will show, it came out that way. And, yeah, in hindsight we probably should have had 244 police officers there. And we shouldn't have taken anything from the word of the folks

who were asking for the protection. We should've said, "Look, this covered the whole neighborhood," and we probably should've called in the National Guard. That's in hindsight.

But hindsight is always twenty-twenty. You would think that a parade permit that involved twelve people, forty-four police officers would've been enough. It turned out to be that it wasn't. The other thing was, everybody's human, everybody makes mistakes. It was an unfortunate happenstance that our tail on them got lost when they came off of I-85. When I say "got lost," he got separated. And that sixty seconds or so made a difference. I don't know whether it made a difference or not. I'm not so sure that with what they were intent on doing to one another, if we had twenty machine guns set up down there that we could've stopped them. You see here again when a bullet comes out of the end of a gun, whether it's fired by the good guy or the bad guy, it's fired.

You know the miraculous closing for this, the miraculous thing of that whole incident was that you had all of those bullets shot, and there were a lot of them--and I've heard that tape a million times. And you can hear it because the sound was rolling. As I said, it was a war. All those bullets were shot. And you had all those people who were just standing around looking, who live down there in the neighborhood. They were just standing around looking, they didn't know what was going on. Just like anything else. You might run out of your house to see something like that. And not one person not involved with the incident even got a scratch. That to me is remarkable. God was with us on that, because as bad as it was, it would have been twice as bad to have a bunch of innocent people who are just standing around that got shot, too.

[End of Interview]