

SOHP Series: Listening for a Change
Davidson College Interviews - Lincolnton

TRANSCRIPT - CLYDE SMITH

Interviewee: Dr. Clyde Smith

Interviewer: Reid McGlamery

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Location: Lincolnton, N.C.

Tape No.: (cassette 1 of 1)
(approximately 60 minutes)

Notes: I first met Dr. Clyde Smith at a public library reception

honoring the opening of the Blake-Stoudemire African-American Culture and History Collection in late February. We briefly discussed then his involvement at Lincolnton High School during integration. He was an assistant football coach and head basketball and track coach. Smith then spent years in school administration, but he has since retired. I met with him one morning, and we talked for nearly an hour about a multitude of issues relating to the 1968 integration. We sat in his office on the second floor of the house he built himself a decade ago. After the interview, he drove me around the community in his car and pointed out several places of interest, including the old and new high school. As soon as we sat down, he pulled out several books and articles he had selected for me to take with me so I would get a better sense of the community.

For more information on desegregation in Lincolnton, and on the relationship between white student Alan Stoudemire and black student Boyce Blake, see Alan Stoudemire, *A Place at the Table* (Atlanta, Cherokee Publishing Company, 2000).

TRANSCRIPT

[Cassette 1 of 1, Side A]

Clyde Smith: Like I said, I wanted to let you know about some of the general attitudes about race and race relations in particular in Lincolnton. It would be real worth your time. This book is pretty easy reading (holds up Elizabeth Leland's *A Place for Joe*, a book about a mentally disabled black child cared for by a white Lincolnton family during the segregation era). You can read this book in several hours. Of course it's got a lot of pictures, things and family kind of history. And I can attest that this is really a true story. In fact I can take you up the street here when we get through and kind of show you some of the things that relate to that.

As I said, I pulled those yearbooks. There's a little bit in there that you can spin off on. I knew this thing with the Student Human Relations Committee that was formed by the students. You know kind of emerged. And that's truly empowerment. You know we talk about empowerment today and it's a big word. Students really became empowered back then in the late 60's. You know, I'll share all that with you. So you go ahead with your questions, and I just wanted to make you aware of some of the general attitudes that kind of already appear in Lincolnton before that and I think that's one of the things that really made integration in Lincolnton High School, you know

fairly easy. It wasn't anything really at that time, you know, I think it was a little easier here than most places. Your larger cities had a lot more problems than we did.

Reid McGlamery: Let me first ask you where you grew up. If not here, where you did and when you moved here.

CS: Okay, I grew up in Gaston County which is a fairly small community, fifteen, eighteen miles from Lincolnton. Traveled through Lincolnton many times - I had relatives here. And of course going to Western Carolina I traveled back and forth through Lincolnton. In fact, that's really how I - one of the ways I ended up in Lincolnton to start with. A guy who's really a key person in this, my senior year in high school I was on a football - in fact Von Ray Harris who still lives here and we can even talk to him by phone today if you'd like and if you have time we can maybe even swing by his house. Get a picture or something. But anyways, his first year at Lincolnton High School was the fall of '59. He was coaching an all-star football game and traditionally that had been between several conferences that Lincolnton played in but didn't really include those small schools in Gaston County, but for some reason a number of those schools were in the playoffs so he made a recruiting trip through Gaston County and picked up a couple of boys that played

in the all-star game. And it's through that relationship that he kind of referred to me and my buddy who he also recruited to go to Western Carolina. And we did, we went to Western Carolina and on his recommendation. His high school teammate and college teammate Dan Robinson was the head football coach so he recommended us. My buddy ended up - he did not go and he was a much better athlete than I was. He was offered a scholarship, I wasn't even offered a scholarship. I went as a walk-on and finally played and earned a scholarship up there.

It's through that relationship with coach Harris that I ended up in Lincolnton. I came back and taught for a couple of years in Mount Holly in Gaston County. Every year Coach Harris would try to encourage me to come to Lincolnton. If there was an opening in Lincolnton he wanted me to come there and we had a pretty good relationship . . . And finally after about three years an opening came and I came to Lincolnton. In that fall they first integrated the schools fully for the first time. About two years prior to that I think they had - either one or two years, I think two years they had like all school systems had "freedom of choice." And a few selected blacks, if they wanted to came to the all white Lincolnton High School. But like I said, it was just a handful. But the year that I came, they closed down Newbold High School which was the all-black county high school. It was an influx of probably 125 to 130, somewhere

in that range, of black students, and it was then that Lincolnton High School was about a thousand students, so really it became roughly all of a sudden about ten percent matriculation of minorities. Prior to that, I didn't know really anything had existed here as far as being a close-by county neighbor, so that's kind of how I ended up here and on the scene as it was at that time.

RM: What were you doing when you first came here? Were you coaching?

CS: Yes, when I first came, I came as an assistant football coach, head track coach and the head basketball coach. Which really was a key thing with the blacks particularly. You know we had a real influx of - in fact the first year here when I coached basketball, all of a sudden the basketball team really became predominantly black even that first year. I mean I think I had like eight or nine black kids out of a squad of fifteen. But that was quite a change of what Lincolnton had experienced before. You know they had had one or two on the team from freedom of choice but all of a sudden we became - I think we had either nine or ten kids that first year.

RM: Do you remember, what was the response or attitude of

the community towards integration?

CS: It was kind of an open attitude. I didn't really see anything . . . of course the schools I had been at in Gaston County, it had been freedom of choice kind of deal too, so it was almost the same kind of situation I had experienced elsewhere. I guess one of the first things really when we - first that fall, in that summer, there was a really high turnout of black football players for the first practice. Closing down an all-black school. And there was a lot of apprehension I guess with people that 'this is finally going to happen,' but my first couple of years I was in education, we began to get a few black students. It seemed like people in general were kind of open about it. I guess some apprehensions, you know, but from everybody - You know, 'How is this going to work?' and so forth.

RM: How did integration come about? Was it an initiative of the community or was it from the government?

CS: It was pretty much like it was everywhere else. It was an outgrowth of 1954 and it had been kind of gradually coming about. And I even saw some - and my college was up in the mountains, so it was unusual - but we began to get a few black students there. Particularly playing football. It was new for

all of us really. People coming in to teach. It was kind of ironic I guess, my first teaching experience I had one or two black kids in school, so we were learning as we were going. And that's pretty much the way it was going here. About everywhere, everyone was learning, feeling out each other and so forth.

RM: Did you notice some tension between the black players and the white coaches?

CS: Didn't see it really as an issue here. One of the things that I really noticed more than anything else is that . . . again, at that time, we thought it was more lack of discipline on their part. One of the things we noticed, like I told you earlier we had a big turnout for football and you know they really dropped off the team real fast. I don't know, we kind of sensed and whether or not it's true or not I'm not really going to say, they were not used to the type of discipline we were dishing out. Our football coach is a very hard-nosed person and turned out to really be successful. He turned out a couple of All-Americans and he was a very successful coach. He was kind of known for his hard nose.

RM: What was the coach's name?

CS: Von Ray Harris. Very strict disciplinarian type of person. Which any successful football coach then, that's what made him successful. We kind of sensed that maybe the black athletes had not been used to the rigors of the type of practices that we were trying to get [tape unclear]. We had a high turnover of people. They were just dropping off almost five or six at a time. Every practice there would be less and less. Until I don't know how many we ended up with that first season. I can kind of look through the book (flips through the yearbook and counts out loud one to six). I see about six or seven on the varsity squad there, and we probably had about 35 or 40 black athletes out. You see they dropped off, and we kind of thought it was because they hadn't been through that rigor.

RM: From my interview with Rudolph Young the other day . . . are you familiar with Rudolph Young?

CS: Yeah, I'm familiar. I know Rudolph.

RM: He mentioned that Newbold athletics didn't receive any local press. Did black athletes at Lincolnton High School receive any press when they first came?

CS: Oh yeah, oh yeah. Immediately. In fact, one of the

athletes, one of our better athletes, Bobby Joe Easter was one of the ones who came here on freedom of choice. Bobby Joe was probably one of the best athletes that ever came, and he really got produced. In fact, the year before I came Lincolnton had emerged in the playoffs and he got top billing as a sophomore and junior - he got coverage. I'm sure what he's saying is true about Newbold getting little press coverage here. Even at that time, Lincolnton High School got most of the press coverage. Even prior to that there was a couple of little small [tape unclear] high schools right here. In fact West Lincoln had just really consolidated, East Lincoln had just formed and they didn't get as much coverage as Lincolnton High School, being in the downtown area. They were kind of the city boys and they got the press coverage. These other county schools, some of them, didn't even have football. They were just small and only had basketball and baseball.

RM: You mentioned that Bobby Joe Easter came during Freedom of Choice. Were most of the blacks who came during Freedom of Choice athletes?

CS: Pretty much. Pretty much a couple of athletes. Another athlete came, in fact Walter Lansler [spelling?], who was a basketball player. He'd been through there. You know, it was

kind of a few athletes and some of the ones whose families . . .
I don't know if they were recruited or what, we never inquired.

RM: Did any black athletes, or athletes in general, ever
make it to college after that?

CS: Oh yeah, in fact Bobby Joe Easter was, he really came
along, he could have played in the Big Ten. He visited Big Ten
schools. Purdue at that time - Purdue University was one of the
big schools. In fact they flew him up there. Bobby Joe's grades
weren't that He ultimately ended up at Middle Tennessee,
in fact he graduated from Middle Tennessee. He actually, I think
what happened, he was recruited pretty highly and ended up, I
think he actually ended up going into the service and then after
the service he ended up at Middle Tennessee. But he was very
highly recruited you know by the Big Ten schools. At that time,
Big Ten schools, unlike Carolina and other local schools who
recruited black athletes, the Big Ten has always had pretty good
success from this area. Big Ten recruited black athletes in the
south, but you know they don't get very many now because there
are too many teams in this area.

RM: Was there a minimum GPA for all athletes on the teams?

CS: No, the only thing there you had was the state Department of Public Instruction or the High School Athletic Association in North Carolina which was kind of a governing body. It required a student to pass three subjects. So that was only it, we didn't know anything about GPA then. If you could pass three subjects, you could play. And those three subjects could be just about anything you wanted, they could be P.E. You know of course everyone had to take English, but just about anyone could pass three subjects particularly because they had P.E. class and some kind of vocational class or something else. So it was pretty easy for someone to pass three subjects.

RM: What was the coaching staff like? Were there any blacks or was it all white?

CS: It was all white, we didn't have any blacks on the coaching staff at all at that time. Had a couple of black faculty members.

RM: Do you think there was a problem with blacks, you mentioned the football players dropping out. Do you think they had trouble with . . .

CS: Adaptation or adjustment? I really don't know. I just

have to be honest, in my stance they couldn't adapt to our ways. Whether our ways are right I don't know. I'll give you an example. In basketball, one of the things that I had to deal with is the looseness of attitude. I mean I was a young coach, but I expected things to be done in a certain way. And even just some of the things, like in basketball they'd come out and they'd be showboating, you know coming out on the basketball court with toboggans [a kind of knitted cap] on their heads. You know that type of thing, and I wasn't used to that. In fact, I recall after about a month or so, I had to call a meeting . . . Our practice would really degenerate at times into kind of a backyard play. And I was trying to set offense instead of free play kinds of stuff, and literally I had to call an early morning meeting one time and dismiss a couple of black athletes. Whether or not I was right at the time, I felt like I had to do that. In fact the suggestion came from Bobby Joe. Bobby Joe was my captain, he was my co-captain. I had a white boy as the other. They came to me after practice one day and they sensed that I was sensing something needed to be done, and I dismissed several of the ones I thought was kind of instigating all that and the ones I felt I could probably do without at that time. I dismissed a couple of those kids, but they didn't react negatively, you know take it out on me in any way. They just accepted it, that's the way it was.

In fact, it's kind of ironic, I never will forget. One of - we had another little black kid that was as a result of me dismissing two or three of these other black kids all of a sudden got to play a lot more. And after two or three weeks went by, maybe his playing time was not quite as much. He came up to me and said "Coach, let's have another one of them meetings. I gotta play more." I guess it was me as a young coach trying to get a handle on things. Like I said, I dismissed some of those guys, and even to this day though quite a few of them see me and and they don't hold a grudge, I'm sure. In fact they've done some things for me in my schools. They've been very supportive. They didn't even react negatively against me at that time. That was about the middle of the year in basketball. But basically it was the same in football. I don't think they held it against Von Ray Harris.

In fact, he had an instance early on in football. Newbold had a guy who was tremendous, he was a man. I mean literally. He was one of those guys who was about 200 pounds, stocky, quick as a cat. His name was Leroy Diamond. He was a star at Newbold. He was "all-everything" in the black conference I guess. Leroy was one of the ones who emerged, he hung with it. I never will forget it. We played the first varsity football game, just barely won 7-0, just got by.

RM: Who was that against?

CS: Against R-S - Central Rutherford-Spindale. Bobby Joe Easter, the kid who'd been at Lincolnton a couple of years. He came to coach Harris after the ballgame and said . . . In fact Leroy hadn't played very much. In the coach's mind he hadn't really earned it, he hadn't seen what he'd been touted up to and what he'd heard from the black school board. Bobby Joe came to coach after the game and said, "Coach, I don't know whether you know this, but Leroy is a Friday night ballplayer." And I never will forget what coach told him, and this'll kind of give you the kind of attitude, the kind of tough attitude Coach Harris always had. He looked at Bobby Joe and he said, "Look Bobby Joe, I'm going to tell you something. You need to get word to Leroy that I'm a Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday coach. If he wants to play for me on Friday night, he needs to come out here on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday in practice and give what it takes to play on Friday night." And Bobby Joe said "Okay." So Bobby Joe evidently got the message to him because come Monday evening, Leroy was a different participant in practice. And that Friday night, Leroy Diamond scored five touchdowns. In fact, we finally had to take him out of the ballgame to keep him from scoring. He only touched the football about six times and five times he scored - from all over the

field. And we ran into a team that really should have been - the game was rated pretty much a toss-up. In the first half, we'd run that team plum out of the ballpark. And Leroy, you talk about a show, he'd put on a show. So, from that, see, through Bobby Joe, he'd gotten a message to him. And those black kids really went to work. A lot of those that had dropped off, if they'd gotten the message earlier, may have been able to contribute much more. And it was probably one of the best football teams that we ever had at Lincolnton, but we didn't really get to go anywhere because it was in a day and time that only one team got to go from the conference. Our chief rival Shelby knocked us off, and we had a 9-1 record and had to stay here and couldn't go anywhere. As where today they take teams with 5-5 records almost, they take so many. But that was just the setup then and we still regard it as probably the best football team we ever had because those black kids really emerged, those six or seven that kind of stayed. They really became top-notch. And this kid here, Boyce, was a defensive back from that group and an offensive backup. But he was primarily defensive.

RM: You mentioned Boyce Blake just now. Did you know Alan Stoudemire and Boyce Blake? [For more information on this relationship see Alan Stoudemire, *A Place at the Table* (Atlanta,

Cherokee Publishing Company, 2000. See also Reid McGlamery interview with Alan Stoudemire.]

CS: I knew them both, yes. Beause I was assistant coach at that time, and really on into spring I was their track coach.

RM: What observations did you make about their friendship? They had a long-lasting friendship, and then in high school...

CS: I knew they was kind of buddies, but I never really . . . In fact I didn't know this until it started coming out in the paper years later. In fact, I can still remember Boyce calling him Zeke, and I didn't realize that Boyce was the one who gave Alan Stoudemire the nickname Zeke as a kid because he said he looked like a Zeke. I knew that they got along good, but I never realized until recently that they lived over where they did, just across the creek from each other. I knew they were friends, but I didn't know that all that stuff transpired all the way back to when they were five years old.

RM: When I talked with Dr. Stoudemire, he mentioned that he and Blake formed a coalition of black and white students to march against the KKK at a rally in Lincolnton.

CS: Right.

RM: Basically they drove the Klan out by showing them the resistance within the community. Did you know anything about this at the time?

CS: Just at a distance. I really didn't. I was kind of new here. I had one kid and our second child was just born, so I was kind of preoccupied. I had heard vaguely about it, and I didn't know how serious it was. It just disappeared. This organization you refer to - in fact, after the football season got underway and things went pretty well. I'll tell you when things got happening was at the end of the football season. Just little things, undercurrent things that we didn't sense. The blacks begun to be left out. Like in the homecoming court, no black girls were selected. Then with cheerleading when things were voted on, and obviously the procedure in place was probably a majority vote. For boys, they earned their position on the athletic teams, but then all of a sudden when it became voting issues...

The KKK, I don't think there's an active group in Lincolnton but probably in Lincoln County at the time there was. Even though the attitude has always been quite open to blacks - a lot of the way the KKK operates is from a distance, but I

don't think that was a Lincolnton attitude. Whether they came from way out in the county or from another county I don't know.

RM: At the football games, I assume Friday nights were big social events. They seem to have been hyped pretty well in the newspapers. Did blacks and whites come together at these events?

CS: I think the blacks came, but they didn't really come in full force. Some came, but it wasn't like the two communities merged together or anything. But they did come, but they were isolated. They would sit in one little corner where they would sit together. Over the years that dispersed.

RM: How long would you estimate that took to disperse?

CS: Several years. It took several years until that kind of . . .

RM: Over your coaching career...you had to dismiss players early on. Did that change as you had time to adjust to coaching in general and coaching of black players?

CS: In fact, at least in my mind, they began to get used to us, and we began to get used to them. And they started to do

more of what we expected of them. When you're a coach, you do what you've been taught to do, especially if you come from a successful background. I didn't have any reluctance to push them, I pushed them hard just like I always did. But maybe they kind of adapted to that and felt more at ease with us.

RM: As a teacher and as a coach, what did you sense was the black parent involvement in the schools? Did parents get involved in parent/teacher organizations?

CS: Yes, we started to get more. The second or third year I was there, a black lady was very involved in our sports booster club. They tended to get involved in the sports booster club. And some of these black parents were connected to the school system, working in the cafeteria or something like that. In fact, I think the superintendent began to recruit. I know, looking at the picture of this boy right here that his mama worked uptown in one of the restaurants. Well, the superintendent began to recruit blacks because we didn't have many on staff. It was hard to find teachers, but it was good to put them wherever they could. Give them a familiar face in the cafeteria. They tried to find teachers, but it's even tougher today than it was then.

RM: You mentioned that there were black faculty but not coaches. Did these teachers come over from Newbold or were they there before the first black students arrived? Did they come with freedom of choice?

CS: To tell you the truth, I think we only had one black person. And he was here when I got here, but I think he came over with freedom of choice. He was Oliver Patterson. He's dead now, died a few years ago. He was a social studies teacher, lived in Charlotte. I think he had some ties here with Lincoln County growing up, and maybe with freedom of choice he came. I think that's really the only black certified staff person we had when I came, in fact I know it is. It was a number of years before we were able to secure someone else. He was the co-sponsor, along with Coach Harris, of the Human Relations Council that was put together by the students.

RM: When I talked with Rudolph Young, he also mentioned that certain businesses and restaurants in town had discriminatory practices. When was that, and were you around when that took place?

CS: No, I think that had already been broken down. Some of it could have happened, but I just . . .

RM: That's it for my questions. If you have anything else you'd like to share or discuss. . .

CS: Well, if you've got time, I'd like to show you around the community a little bit...get a sense of the place. I'll show you some things.

RM: That would be great. Let's do it.

End of interview