

**GREENSBORO VOICES/GREENSBORO PUBLIC LIBRARY ORAL HISTORY  
PROJECT**

INTERVIEWEE: Charles O. Bess

INTERVIEWER: Eugene E. Pfaff, Jr.

DATE: January 20, 1984

[Begin Tape 1, Side A]

EUGENE PFAFF: Mr. Bess, what was your job at Woolworth's on February 1, 1960?

CHARLES BESS: My job was busboy that day.

EP: How long had you worked at Woolworth's?

CB: I had worked at Woolworth's about four years.

EP: Four years, I see. What were conditions like for the black workers at Woolworth's? Were you pretty well-paid? Were you paid less than the white workers? Did you have any way of estimating that?

CB: Well, at that time, I thought that I was paid pretty good, at that time.

EP: Do you mind me asking what you were paid?

CB: No. At that time, in 1960, I believe I--I think I was being paid around about a dollar and a half, somewhere around there. It might have been a little less.

EP: And how many days a week did you work?

CB: Six days a week.

EP: Six days a week. From what time to what time?

CB: Well, I went to work at 9:30 [a.m.], and I was getting off sometimes 6:30 in the evening because the busboy and the kitchen help always stayed around to clean up, and

sometimes we'd be getting away in less than--it was later than sometimes 6:30, sometimes seven.

EP: How many black employees were there at the counter?

CB: How many black employees? There was about four in all.

EP: You and three women? Is that correct?

CB: About three women, right.

EP: Do you recall their names?

CB: Yes I can. The women that worked back there, the one name was Geneva Tisdale, Anita Jones, and Susie Kimball.

EP: How about the white women? Do you recall their names?

CB: There was a few that I still recall back there. There was one that worked back there, her name was Jane Yates and there was her sister--I can't recall her name, I know it's there but I can't recall her name, but those two sisters worked back there--and there was Mabel--I can't recall her last name, though.

EP: Moving along to the events of approximately 4:30 on Monday afternoon February 1, 1960, do you recall seeing the four young men come in and sit at the counter?

CB: Yes. I did.

EP: What happened?

CB: Well, it was kind of late in the evening on that day. These four fellows from [North Carolina] A&T State University, they comes in and sit at the counter. There was--the white waitresses back there, they was kind of skeptical about telling these four fellows that we couldn't serve them. And so one of the black workers--one of the black sandwich board girls back there--at that time now, there wasn't any black waitresses back there. So the girl that was on the sandwich board, one of them told these four fellows that, "We don't serve colored folks here."

EP: And what was her name?

CB: I think her name was--I really don't recall which one it was, but I think that one was Susie Kemball.

EP: So she told them that the store didn't serve "coloreds", like you said, and what happened next?

CB: Well, they kept on sitting. And then one of the black guys, they said, "You mean that we just have bought something over on this counter here, and our money's not good over here? We're going to keep on sitting, because we haven't broken any rules." So they kept sitting, and Mr. [Clarence Lee "Curly"] Harris, he was the manager of the store there, he walked by them and looked at them, but he didn't say anything. After a while, the police came by. He walked by them and looked at them. They didn't say anything to him. They kept on sitting. And no sooner closing time comes, which was, I think was about around 5:30, I think it closed somewhere by about 5:30 in there, and they comes by--they gets up and walks away. [unclear]

EP: Now after this initial exchange, and after Mr. Harris walked by them, and after the policeman walked by, did anybody on the staff say anything else to them or did they say anything else to members of the staff?

CB: No they didn't. No.

EP: They just kept sitting there?

CB: They just kept sitting.

EP: What happened after the store closed? Did you and other members of the staff talk about it? Now, I mean prior to this meeting that Mr. Harris called the next morning. I mean, that same evening did you all talk about it amongst yourselves?

CB: No we didn't, no we didn't. After these fellows got up and walked away it was time for me to start cleaning up anyway. I went--I go down the stairs there, in the basement there, and get my mop bucket and everything and I started my cleaning up. If anybody else talked about it, while I was away, I didn't know about that.

EP: How did you feel about it, were you surprised?

CB: Was I surprised to see them sitting there?

EP: Yes.

CB: Well, yes I was. At that time I didn't know what just happened. I didn't know what was happening, or the reason they were sitting there and then moved.

EP: Had you ever seen that before?

CB: No. That's my first time seeing it. So they--now, another thing, if I recall, while they were sitting there, they never actually bought but one thing, and that was coffee. They said, "Give me a cup of coffee." And at that time I don't think the way people were looking at them, they would start paying attention to them. They were just sitting around.

EP: What were your feelings when you saw them sitting there?

CB: What were my feelings?

EP: Yes.

CB: Well, I kind of felt like that something was up. I felt like something was up, the reason being, they didn't move. Because these fellows was from A&T which was supposed to be--these were supposed to be educated guys. And my feelings were I felt like something was up, but I just couldn't pinpoint at that time--

EP: You mean because they were students in college you thought, rather than being an individual action, it was organized maybe somehow?

CB: Right.

EP: Did you discuss this that evening with your family or neighbors or anyone?

CB: I went straight home and told my family about it.

EP: Were they surprised?

CB: Yes, they was. I went home told them--at that time, I wasn't married then. So I went home and tell, I tell them--my sisters and my brothers all about it, about the transactions that took place at Woolworth's that day.

EP: Now how old were you in 1960?

CB: At that time, let's see. I was twenty-one.

EP: So, then, the next morning what happened?

CB: Okay, the next morning--that was before these fellows came back. Okay, Mr. Harris, who is the, who was the manager at Woolworth's then, he calls a meeting between the help in the kitchen, the help behind the counter there, along with the head of the Luncheonette Department, which is Mrs. Rachel Hoke[?]. We have the meeting, and Mr. Harris explained to us, he said--the way he put it to us there, he said there was some foreigners who was--they didn't like other people. The Jews, they didn't like certain people, and the Germans, they didn't like certain people. And Mrs. Rachel Hoke, she made a statement, she said that we black folks is kind of a diet amongst ourselves. Then she made a statement to whenever we worked behind the counter there, "Don't say nothing to them. Just ignore them. Just do your work." And--

EP: And how did you feel about that?

CB: Well, I didn't particularly worry about that statement. And the reason I didn't think anything about that statement, there was--there was [unclear] sitting over there, asking for service, and I was ignoring them, because I know that they felt bad about it. They probably just didn't understand why I was working and wasn't saying nothing.

EP: Well, then you went to work, and--before we get into the activities of the next day, you said, according to this picture here, in which you and these four students are listed, is this the same area where the four sat the first day?

CB: Right.

EP: And where is this in relation to the store?

CB: Okay now, this right here is called the front counter. That--

EP: Do you care to draw a diagram?

CB: Yeah at counter, the counter goes something like this here. [drawing a picture] See that? Where you're talking about that L shape, now, it would go--something like that, and then it turns, like that.

EP: Yes.

CB: Okay now, this right here was called the back counter right here.

EP: Yes.

CB: That's called the back counter, and over here was the front counter, right there--

EP: Yes.

CB: --the front counter. Okay now, these four boys--these four men rather, young men, they sat right here.

EP: Yes.

CB: The first [time] they came in, they didn't sit back there.

EP: I see.

CB: They sat right over here.

EP: And this would be the Elm Street side, and this would be Washington Street side?

CB: Right. That's Elm Street side over there, and George Washington Street side.

EP: Now, I have read accounts that they left by the side door on the Washington Street side. Is that correct? Do you recall?

CB: They might have did. They might have did at the time.

EP: Okay, now, when was this picture taken? Do you recall?

CB: It had to be about--I'd say this right here was the--on that--it had to be on that first day.

EP: Well, these are not the four original sit-inners. I have been told that this was perhaps the second day.

CB: It might've--I don't exactly recall on that one, but that could have been the second day. I wouldn't doubt--

EP: Here's a picture of the four that first day, does that--do you recall them looking like that?

CB: Yes.

EP: Here's Mr. [Franklin] McCain, and here's Mr. [Joseph] McNeil, and this is Mr. [Ezell] Blair and Mr. [David] Richmond. Do you remember Mr. McCain, the tall one with the ROTC [Reserve Officers Training Corps] hat? Does this jog your memory as to how they looked that first day?

CB: Especially Mr. Blair there. He's the main one that really raises up in my mind.

EP: Why is that?

CB: I guess because he's the leader of the group there.

EP: Oh, I see. He did the talking?

CB: He's the one that did the talking mostly.

EP: I see. Okay, well, continuing with the second day then, do you recall when, what time of day, the students came that second day?

CB: That second day, I don't recall exactly by what time it was, but it was kind of in the evening, it might have two or three o'clock, something like that.

EP: And where did they sit?

CB: They sit almost the same place where the first group did.

EP: And how many of them were there?

CB: Well, at that time, instead of being four it got a little larger. It might have been six or seven of them. It kept getting larger each day.

EP: Well, what did you--I assume you followed the directions of management and did not speak to them, is that correct?

CB: Yeah, I followed that, I followed that.

EP: Did--what was the reaction of the crowd, in general, in the store, primarily the white people? What did they do? Just stare at them?

CB: Well, yes. Because, the second day--they really found out what was really happening there on that second day. See now, I didn't found out what was happening the second day myself. The second day when I had gotten back to work there, after the meeting and everything there, it really got in the air--what was really happening--I understood, it got in the air there, that these four fellows had started a sit-in movement to eat at lunch counters, and that Dr. Martin Luther King and the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] was backing them up. That's what had got there. Okay, after I hear that now, well, I really got on their side then. I really, after I'd seen what they was really doing, well, I felt, I really felt bad about it. That's my feelings about it.

EP: You had mentioned the first day, like the white waitresses were skeptical about going out and talking to them. Do you recall what their reaction was? Did they talk about it? Did they just go about their duties?

CB: They talked about it amongst themselves, I'm pretty sure they did.

EP: Do you recall what they said or the nature of their conversation?

CB: No, but I do know they were talking about it down there.

EP: All right, they mentioned that about the third or fourth day, large numbers of whites and blacks gathered outside the store and in the store.

CB: Yes.

EP: Newspaper accounts said that there may have been in as many as six hundred people right there around the lunch counter, and--do you recall that large groups of people?

CB: On the second day?

EP: No, this probably would have been about the third or fourth day.

CB: Yes it was getting pretty close to Friday or Saturday. It might have been that Friday.

EP: Did you see any incidents of violence like ketchup and sugar poured on their heads, or lighted cigarettes put in their pockets, anyone being pulled off the stools? Did you see anything like that?

CB: No I didn't see nothing like nothing pull of the stools or anything. The violence--there wasn't too much of violence going on. There wasn't too much of violence going on.

EP: Do you recall when, again about the third or fourth day, a lot of what they call “white teenage tucks” [sic-turks?] came in? They started occupying the seats, and holding onto water patrons so that the black students couldn’t sit down. Do you remember seeing that?

CB: Well--

EP: They wouldn’t give up their seats except to a white person.

CB: No. I don’t recall that.

EP: Were you largely in the back most of the time, or were you out at the counter area frequently?

CB: I was mostly at the counter there.

EP: Did any of the students try to talk to you?

CB: Yes, they sure did.

EP: What did they say?

CB: They would--sometimes when I would pass by they’d say, “Hey mister, hey mister, let me tell you something. Hey mister let me tell you something.”

EP: Trying to get service?

CB: Yes. That was Tuesday--two or three of them, they said, “Hey mister, are you with us, or are you against us? Are you with us or are you against us?” [unclear] And one guy, he came from the other side of the counter--you see, I was always, I was constantly moving. I was constantly moving all the time I just didn’t stand there, I guess instead of standing around behind the counter--but if I was steady moving a lot of times there--and one of the fellows there, he said, “Hey, is y’all allowed to talk? What if I said to you--” What they was trying to do was trying to get our attention, but we weren’t saying nothing. And one fellow said, “Can’t y’all talk? Are y’all allowed to talk?” Nobody said nothing. And one of the guys he said, “Hey fellow, do you want a job? I can get you a job. I’ll get you a job [unclear] somewhere. I can get you a job.” I didn’t say anything, I just kept on--I just kept walking.

EP: Were you ever threatened by the management if you did talk to them?

CB: No, I wasn't threatened by them.

EP: I mean, nobody was threatened to get fired?

CB: No.

EP: Do you recall when the A&T football team came in and formed sort of a wedge through the crowd to allow people or students to get to the counters to sit down? Do you recall that? This is another incident that probably would have occurred on Thursday or Friday. [pause] Well, another--

CB: It could have been--because there was--by me being behind the counter there, but that might have been something that was going on outside there. See now--that was another thing too, that was stuff going on outside the building there.

EP: Was sort of thing was going on outside?

CB: Going on outside the building? Okay, I'll see if I can tell you about that next. On outside the building there was people going on. I'm pretty sure you read about one of the other A&T's [students] was carrying a sign.

EP: What was the--do you recall what the sign said?

CB: Yes. The sign said, "Give us our equal rights." And one of the white ones was carry one also. He made a sign, and he started walking beside him. He made his sign.

EP: Yes I think I've seen that picture. Please continue. I'll try to look for that picture.

CB: Okay. He made his sign and I definitely know what his sign said, also. He said, on his sign, he said, "Go home negroes." That's what he said.

EP: That's the picture that I recall. They walked side by side.

CB: He walked side by side, yes.

EP: Did you ever see any violence or anything like that outside? Was there pushing, shoving, any words exchanged, that sort of thing?

CB: No, I didn't because--now, right at the counter one time there, two times there, there was one of the white guys came by there and [unclear] he said "get up, get up."

EP: You mean he was taunting him?

CB: Yes, taunting him, you know "Get up." And this got kind of heated--he stood up then, he rose up, and he said "Come on, come on then, come on then, come on then!" And he sat back down.

EP: All right, now, does this look familiar too, during that first week? [shows photo] This is another photograph taken. This is the beginning of the back counter right? And this is what you called the front counter, going around this way?

CB: Yes right there, that's the one right there. Yes, you turn it at the back counter there.

EP: Okay. This is what I meant about happening sometime third or fourth day. See these white teenage boys sitting down at the counter? Incidentally, is that you there?

CB: That's me, that's me right there again. [laughter]

EP: You're in here a number of times aren't you?

CB: Yeah, they--yeah, I recall that now, I recall that. They was sitting down there keeping students from sitting down.

EP: Yes, now, this is something I want to get to in a minute: the bomb scare.

CB: Okay.

EP: So, you never saw any--did they sit down at the counter just for a few hours everyday or all during the time the store was open?

CB: No, they didn't sit all times the store was open.

EP: Just came at certain times of the day?

CB: Certain times of the day to sit down.

EP: Do you remember what times of day they would come?

CB: They would usually come some time after lunch.

EP: I think this is what you're talking about [referring to picture mentioned earlier]. [unclear, talking over each other] And I don't see the white boy.

CB: [muffled] I'm on the right, yes. Okay, yeah you don't see them--there's another one of them right there. You don't see the--

EP: I don't think they have a photograph of them side by side--Yeah!

CB: There you go, there we go.

EP: And you specifically remember that?

CB: Yeah, I remember that one. You can see him right there [?].

EP: Okay, so they would come in for what, a few hours, usually after lunch?

CB: Yes. Now Saturday's when things really happened now.

EP: Ah, yes. Why don't you tell me about Saturday?

CB: Okay, on Saturday, as I told you, the store would open around about 9:30 in the morning at Woolworth's there. So, when I got to work that morning, when I was getting ready to go in, they had gathered up that morning. All had gathered up at the door, and as soon as that door opened, for business, they rushed in there [makes slapping sound] until all those people-- there was sixty-six seats at the counter there, I think that's what it was, the number of seats there. They filled all those seats there, and sit there, wouldn't move, filled all up. And if one did move, another black was there to take his place. If one had to move anything, if he had to get up, another black still was there to take his place, all through the day. Okay, it went on like that all morning long, all morning. And that was sometime after work all day, it was still going on. Okay, now this goes on down to the bomb scare now.

It was about, it was kind of late in the evening, it might have been about three o'clock, might have been real late. Three o'clock was pretty close to the time, though. The manager got a phone call from some lady somewhere that was telling him that there was a bomb planted in Woolworth's. See, had to get out because there was a bomb threat in there. And that was how--and when that happened now, it was called out on the loud speaker for everybody to clear the store. Okay, we all cleared out of the store, everybody cleared out of the store there.

EP: Did they say over the loud speaker why, or just to clear the store? I mean, did they say it was a bomb threat?

CB: No, they didn't say that as I recall, but they did say, "Everybody clear the store at once."

EP: Now, did anyone from management tell, specifically tell the counter people to leave the store and that it was a bomb threat?

CB: Yes, right.

EP: I mean, who would that person be, do you recall?

CB: No, I don't.

EP: It's not important. So what did you do, did you leave the store immediately?

CB: We all left immediately. As a matter of fact, now, when that happened, they were saying for everybody to leave the store immediately. Those students at A&T were rejoicing-- they started saying, "Yea," they started rejoicing in it. And the students go outside there, and they marched on back to A&T there, marched on back to A&T. Now, where Woolworth's is sitting there, on the other side of the street there, was usually biased over there. But we all got across the street there. All people that work at Woolworth's, we got across the street there to the other side. We stayed over there--we didn't stay across the street that long, but after that, though, we went home.

EP: You didn't go back into the store?

CB: Well, yes, but everything was closed.

EP: But there was nobody at the other counters?

CB: No.

EP: And the kitchen had been shut down, this sort of thing?

CB: But, you know, everybody had gotten out of the store that evening except one person.

EP: Who was that?

CB: He was one of the white stocking boys. He was back in the stock room, back there somewhere, and--he was back in the stockroom there working. So when we was all out there, he was wondering where we was at and everything.

EP: He hadn't heard the--

CB: No he had not--and so as we got back in there he said, "Where'd y'all go to? Where was everybody?" And he said--his name was Mike--and we said, "Mike, didn't you hear--about the bomb threat?" He said, "No, I didn't know about no speaker nothing."

EP: [laughter]

CB: And so if the placed had blowed up, he'd blow up.

EP: You know, you said that the woman who received the call said it was a woman. Did you hear--did she or someone else maybe specifically that it was a woman that phoned in the bomb threat?

CB: Oh, see, it was a woman that called Mr. Harris, he was the manager. They did say it was a woman though.

EP: Now, the store closed on Saturday, of course, it's not open on Sundays, did it reopen again on Monday?

CB: It reopened on Monday.

EP: Did the counter, lunch counter reopen on Monday, or did it stay closed?

CB: It was open at that time. It was open, but the food didn't come up there.

EP: One story that I've heard is that the counter would stay open until black students sat down and then it would shut down again, if a large number of black students sat down. Do you recall it being like that--opening, shutting down, opening, shutting down, or did it stay open, or stay closed? Do you recall which way it went?

CB: At that time I don't recall it--the counter opening and closing down like that--

EP: You just recall it staying open?

CB: Yes, but the students they, as I recall, that following Monday they didn't come back. At that time, I think, there was mostly a concentration being on the Kress store, down at Kress store and S&W [Cafeteria]. There was--at Kress store, I don't exactly recall what happened in there, but they did go there though, Kress store and S&W Cafeteria.

EP: Well, the lunch counter stayed open and I guess, what, they would serve whites? So your job just went on as usual, is that correct?

CB: It went on, although at that time, the counter wasn't what you did though, it'd be slack.

EP: So a lot of people stayed away.

CB: A lot of people stayed away, it was real slack.

EP: I see. And did the crowd continue to gather outside the store?

CB: Yes.

EP: They weren't picketing though?

CB: No they weren't picketing.

EP: Where would you eat lunch? Would you eat lunch in the store?

CB: Yes I did. The place I ate lunch at, there was a little table that they'd be kicking up chairs at, that's where we always ate lunch at.

EP: And that's where just the blacks ate?

CB: Yes.

EP: And the whites ate where?

CB: They could just sit at the counter where they were at. If they wanted to go somewhere else and eat in the store there that was their privilege.

EP: Did the white workers have a separate eating area?

CB: No.

EP: Well, did the black help talk amongst themselves about what was going on and how they felt about it when they would eat together, say, for lunch or break or whatever?

CB: Yes. We felt like--we knew what was really happening there. We knew that--we talked about the black students there, and that the NAACP was backing them up.

EP: And had you learned that it had spread to like, the Kress store and several other stores and was spreading to other cities?

CB: Right. [coughs] We started seeing that after it broke in at Woolworth's there, it spread on through the South there, on through the South, and all the way through the South there. Other college students were doing--were imitating.

EP: Is that when you first came to realize that something really big was happening?

CB: Well, yeah.

EP: What was your feeling about that? [coughs] Were you excited, pleased?

CB: About it going through the community?

EP: Well, this whole movement spreading out, not just being confined to one little store in Greensboro, going to different cities, and going to different states throughout the south. Were you excited, pleased, a little bit concerned that this might lead to violence, or what?

CB: No, I didn't think it would lead to violence or anything. Yes, I was well pleased on it. I was glad to see that the blacks could eat with the whites as well as work with them. I was well pleased over the whole thing.

EP: I'm reading the newspaper account from it [on a] daily basis in preparation for this interview, it is my understanding that the reason the students didn't come back that second week was because a truce was signed, in that the students agreed not to go back down to the store and to let the city form a committee and try to work things out. Then I have heard that, periodically, a student would come by and check the counter to see if the policy had changed, if they were serving whites and not serving blacks and then would stop when a number of blacks came by. And then on April first, these histories of the sit-ins indicate that picketing began again. Do you recall that? About an entire month in March when there were no students there, business was slack? Do you recall that or not?

CB: No, I don't recall that part. But now, like you said, the reason they did come back that day, as you said, I think they was waiting on something then, waiting on to see what exactly what the staff was going to do, would they serve them or what? They were waiting. Well, there was a waiting period--now, see, now this happened in February [thinking aloud] February, March--it might have been the last part of March or April, something like that, first part of April, was when they really opened up to serve blacks. But, now, we at Woolworth's was the first to eat at the counter there.

EP: Well, now, who is "we"?

CB: "We" is the black employees that was working there.

EP: Okay, now, who would they have been? Do you recall their names?

CB: Yes, one was Anita Jones, she's dead now; Susie Kemball, and I was asked to, but I had to be away that day. Mrs. Hoke asked me would I take part of sitting in that there, but I had to be away because my brother he was in Cary Hospital and I had to go down and get him. Now, the ones that sit, what I heard when I was away, I know Anita Jones was sitting, and Susie Kemball, and Geneva Tisdale. There was around about three or four of them I think sitting there. And I understand was while they were sitting there, that a white woman was looking at them real strange, but they kept on sitting and everything went on nicely.

EP: And they just ate their lunch and went on back to work.

CB: Right and just went back to work, but that was the employees worked there. See, now, Mrs. Hoke, she told us, she said that if we're going to start serving the blacks, she said, "I want the employees that work here to eat first." Well, we started out eating first, and after we ate there, it broke up and everybody who came in started eating there.

EP: And did you ever sit down and eat at the lunch counter at Woolworth's?

CB: Yeah, a few times.

EP: I mean, did you do it as a point of pride?

CB: No.

EP: The fact that now you could, to symbolize a victory?

CB: Right, I knew if I wanted to sit down there I could.

EP: The listing that the paper gives is that this happened around approximately July twenty-fifth or July twenty-sixth. Do you remember that as such?

CB: When we sit down and eat?

EP: In other words, that it happened during the summer?

CB: Let's see, now, it might have been, because at that time it was feeling pretty warm, it was kind of warm.

EP: So, then did things just return to normal? Did a lot of blacks come to sit at the lunch counter or just now and then, small numbers?

CB: Just small numbers, there wasn't too many coming in.

EP: And there was never anything--

CB: No never.

EP: How long did you continue to work at Woolworth's?

CB: After that?

EP: Yes.

CB: After that I--this happened back in 1960; I left Woolworth's in about '61.

EP: So you left the next year.

CB: Yes. I wanted to find a better job in that day.

EP: Do you recall when the retail stores, and the theatres and the cafeterias were being picketed in sixty-two, sixty-three—well, sixty-one, -two and -three? Do you recall that downtown?

CB: When the cafeterias were being picketed down there?

EP: Yes, and there were large night-time marches in the spring of 1962, I mean, involving thousands of people.

CB: Yeah, yeah. I remember something like that.

EP: Did you participate--

CB: No. I didn't do that.

EP: Did you ever go down and watch it?

CB: No, I didn't.

EP: Did you continue to remain living here in Greensboro?

CB: Yes, I did.

EP: Was the black community pretty excited about these mass demonstrations and the mass marches?

CB: I believe they was.

EP: I mean, do you recall discussions about it amongst your neighbors, friends and so forth?

CB: No, I don't.

EP: Well, I guess that pretty much sums it up. I thank you for sharing your memories with me.

CB: Thank you.

[End of Interview]