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Interview

with

WILLIAM N. MARTIN

August 30, 1995

by Joseph Mosnier

Indexed by Joseph Mosnier

The Southern Oral History Program  
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

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**SOHP Series: The North Carolina Politics Project****TAPE LOG**

Interviewee: Sen. William N. ("Bill") Martin

Interviewer: Joseph Mosnier

Interview Date: Wednesday, August 30, 1995

Location: Legislative Office Building, Raleigh, NC

Tape No.: 8.30.95-WM (cassette 1 of 1)  
(approximate total length 90 minutes)

Topic: An oral history of Sen. William Martin, currently serving his seventh consecutive term in the North Carolina Senate. Martin been an important figure in state Democratic Party and African American politics for nearly two decades. Born May 25, 1945, in Eden, Rockingham County, NC, he was the only child of educators. After graduating high school in 1962, Martin attended NC A&T College (now University) in Greensboro, took part in civil rights protests during his college years, and graduated in 1966 with a degree in economics. He then moved to Bridgeport, CT, where he worked for IBM and Liberty Mutual Insurance and also was active in the local Congress of Racial Equality chapter. In 1972, he received a law degree from George Washington School of Law in Washington, D.C., and he returned to Greensboro in 1974 to practice law. After making an unsuccessful run in 1980 for the state House, he was elected to the state Senate in 1980. During his 15 years in the Senate, Martin has been active in such legislative causes as equity in education, the funding of African American heritage sites within the state, social welfare reforms, and governmental efficiency.

Substantively, the interview was organized around four major themes: his personal biographical history; the evolution of black political activity in North Carolina since the late 1970s; the re-emergence of the state Republican Party; and certain of the culturally-charged issues with which he has been involved as a legislator during his Senate tenure. The interview proceeds through these matters in roughly chronological fashion, with a focus on Martin's political involvements.

Comments: Only text in quotation marks is verbatim; all other text is paraphrased, including the interviewer's questions.

**TAPE INDEX****Counter Index   Topic**

[Cassette 1 of 1, Side A -- Tape No. 8.30.95-WM]

- 001 [Opening announcement.]
- 007 Sketch of family history, childhood, education. Parents were educators.
- 047 His participation in civil rights demonstrations during his college years at NC A&T in Greensboro after his enrollment in 1962; and the importance he assigns to these experiences. "I consider that as a very inspiring and a very meaningful time...." Details of demonstrations and arrest, relationship of student protestors to the university administrators, refusal of bail, boycott of merchants, preparation by the demonstrators for non-violent protest, etc.
- 146 The impressions he formed at the time of local black leaders, particularly clergy, and of white local Chamber of Commerce authorities.
- 189 How he viewed the prospects for societal change at the time -- he was "cautiously optimistic."
- 210 Immediately upon his graduation in 1966, he moved to Bridgeport, CT, working first for IBM and later for Liberty Mutual Insurance Co., before enrolling in the fall of 1969 in George Washington University School of Law in Washington, D.C. He graduated in 1973, and returned to Greensboro to join a law practice in 1974.
- 224 His earliest involvements in community groups and advocacy organizations in Greensboro. The considerable influence on Martin of the senior member of the law firm, Henry E. Frye (Frye was the first African American elected to the state legislature in NC in the twentieth century, winning a House seat in 1968 and thereby beginning a long run of service as a legislator before his appointment to the state Supreme Court in 1983). Frye was "an outstanding role model" whose work in the political arena Martin admired as truly selfless.
- 258 Black leadership in Greensboro and across the state in the late 1970s. In urban areas, typically "a nucleus continued from the 1960s." Key black political organizations: NAACP, the Durham Committee on the Affairs of Black People, etc.
- 301 These groups operated in largely autonomous fashion, except for the two groups that spanned the state, the NAACP and the NC Leadership Black Caucus.
- 318 How he viewed the treatment given the few early black legislative pioneers during the 1970s (these were the ones "who laid the foundation" but who lacked a "critical mass"); and reflections on the subsequent growth of the African American presence in the legislature ("it's a little bit better now").
- 355 Racially-charged events in Greensboro in the late 1970s and early 1980s, including the 1979 Klan-Nazi killings of blacks and local political redistricting.

- 458 His decision to run, ultimately unsuccessfully, for the state House in 1980. He views the move to political service as a natural extension of his extensive earlier work in community organizations and advocacy groups. Details of the campaign and primary.
- 538 Digression to discuss his experiences in Bridgeport, CT, between 1966 and 1969, during which time he was heavily involved in CORE and with community organizations dedicated to racial justice.
- 598 His successful 1982 race for the state Senate. Because he faced no primary opposition he was able to focus his efforts on the general election; along with other local Democratic candidates he ran a "Democratic unity campaign."
- 650 First impressions of the Senate in 1982, where he was the only African American member. One memory stands out concerning his early introduction of a bill to abolish the death penalty, which was one of two bills in the Senate's history (ERA was the other) to be killed even before assignment to committee.
- 696 [End of Side A.]

[Cassette 1 of 1, Side B -- Tape No. 8.30.95-WM]

- 001 [Opening announcement.]
- 002 (cont'd description of the death penalty bill episode). Description of how Martin nonetheless built a successful working relationship over time with the Sen. J. Ollie Harris, who quashed the death penalty bill. Explanation of his belief that legislative effectiveness requires relationships of trust between legislators, and that this trust often takes a good many years to develop.
- 065 How many of his legislative goals have come to fruition only after many years of effort. The indispensability in his view of articulating a different type of political message.
- 094 Reapportionment in the 1980s and its impact on the state legislature. "Reapportionment was the driving factor" behind the gains in the numbers of black legislators. How reapportionment strategies for advancing minority representation might have been fine tuned.
- 130 Democratic Party leadership during the 1980s did anticipate some Republican Party gains (because of demographic and other changes, and change in the national mood), but the extent of the Republican gains in Nov. 1994 was a great surprise. How the GOP has done a much better job getting its message out. "The Democratic Party has been very lax" both when getting its message out and when countering the GOP message. How he would like to see the Democratic Party focus on the question, Will you children be better off years from now if we pursue these policies?

- 198 The difficulty in fighting the “thirty second sound bite” and the necessity of getting citizens involved in a much more substantive sense in political debate.
- 223 The evolution of the Legislative Black Caucus in NC after its beginnings during the 1980-81 legislative term. During the 1983-84 session there was, for the first time, a “critical mass” of black legislators in Raleigh sufficient to push certain key concerns. These included increased funding for the state’s five historically black university campuses and community economic development support.
- 298 The relationship of the Caucus to the Democratic Party leadership over the years.
- 331 Black politics during Dan Blue’s tenure as Speaker 1991-94.
- 353 The Republican Party leaders most responsible for GOP gains in the last fifteen years.
- 416 Discussion of his efforts in the Senate on issues with a key racial dimension: the Charlotte Hawkins Brown State Historic Site and other sites illuminating the African American experience in NC; the Guilford County school merger bill; and the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday bill.
- 696 [End of Side B and End of Interview. NB: The conversation appears to end abruptly without closure, but in fact the end of Side B was reached just as I was about to thank Sen. Martin and conclude the interview.]