

SOHP Series: Desegregation and the Inner Life of Chapel Hill Schools**TAPE LOG – PROFESSOR JEROME SEATON**

Interviewee: Professor Jerome Seaton

Interviewer(s): Jay Moore and Lea Fisher

Interview Date: Monday, April 2, 2001

Location: Professor Seaton's office in 413B Alumni Building at
The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Topic: An oral history of Professor Jerome Seaton. Seaton is a professor in the Curriculum in Asian Studies. He teaches Chinese history and poetry. He is from West Lafayette, Indiana. He was an undergraduate at Wabash College, which is a men's college in Crawfordsville, Indiana. When he was a senior in college he transferred to Indiana University in Bloomington, Indiana, so that his wife could continue her education along with him. He went on after graduating to receive his PhD in Chinese at Indiana University. In 1968 he moved with his wife and one year old son to Chapel Hill where he accepted a job with the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He has three children, two sons and an adopted African-American daughter. He was one of the creators of a co-op, private school in Chapel Hill called Green Willow. He was a member of the Board of trustees at Green Willow.

The interview began with a basic life history. He told of the process of integrating the schools in Indiana. Sports teams, especially basketball, were one of the key reasons for integrating the Indiana schools. He then went on to tell about the tumultuous years of integration at Wabash College. He along with other fraternity brothers quit their fraternities because of reluctance to admit African-American students. They went on to form a new fraternity chapter that did. He then told of the difficulties of his adopted daughter's schooling. He was single-handedly responsible for integrating a small private school, Green Willow, this later lead to other African-American children receiving private school educations. He then began to tell us of the time when all three of his children began school in the integrated Chapel Hill School system and the problems they encountered.

START OF TAPE 1, SIDE A

JEROME SEATON
APRIL 2, 2001

LEA FISHER: This is an interview with Professor Jerome Seaton. My name is Lea Fisher and I'll be interviewing with Jay Moore. Today is April 2, 2001 and we are on the 3rd floor [actually 4th floor] of Alumni Building and today we will be discussing the integration of the Chapel Hill School Systems.

I guess we'll just start with some life history questions. Like, where did you grow up? What was your early childhood like?

JEROME SEATON: Ummmmm...I grew up in West Lafayette, Indiana. Which is where Perdue University is. My father was a professor of agriculture and my mother was a registered nurse. West Lafayette is a tiny little town surrounded by cornfields but its right across the Wabash River from Lafayette. Which is a much larger town, which was actually quite an industrial center in World War II. It had the nation's biggest Alcoa plant, making skin for bombers and fighters, making thin aluminum roll stuff. There were no black people on the West Lafayette side of the river. Although Perdue was integrated in the late 40's it may have been integrated before that. There were black players on the basketball team in the late 40's [laughter]. And about fifteen or twenty years before they were at Carolina, so it was you know (). On the other hand there was a black ghetto in the other, the industrial town it was very small but it was definitely a ghetto. I remember when...uhhhhhh...Lafayette city schools were integrated.

LF: When was that?

JS: It was...uhhh...was in 40..1947. There was a black school that was kindergarten through high school and then there was a kid at high school level who was such a good basketball player that they did away with segregated schools so that they

could get him over to the white high school, so they could win the state championship which they did. [laughter]

LF: So it was sports related? Or was it...

JS: Yeah...

LF: Or political decision....

JS: Well you know, that's how; I mean of course it was a political decision. That the great far-seeing civil rights advocates [laughter]ummmmm... won the town a state championship in basketball.

JAY MOORE: How many African Americans were in your school?

JS: None, none on the Westside, as a matter of fact even when I left. I think the year after I graduated from high school, which was 1959, that was the year the first African American freshman was admitted. It was now integrated and multicultural because the university was huge. Let's see, there were three Chinese kids in my high school class, which graduated in 1959. But no African Americans. () people were moving into town. There weren't any black people living in town.

LF: Did even students go to the ()...

JS: Yeah, they did. Yes there wasn't....uhhh...officially segregated it was just that there were no African Americans living within the town limits of West Lafayette, so it didn't have to be segregated if they had chosen to (). By that time they loved their football, basketball teams, which were beginning to have large numbers of African Americans and I think the town thought that it was progressive. Just an accident that there were black people of the age to have children they were all college students and they were ghettoized...uhhhhhh...it was a progressive and western town.

Indiana you may not know was the national center of the KKK. The head of the KKK was the governor of Indiana for two terms and finally had to be, they only got him out of office and really burnt the back the of the KKK in Indiana by arresting him on a federal charge of the Mann Act for carrying a woman across state lines for immoral purposes.

JM: They arrested him as Governor?

JS: Yeah...

JM: Hmmmm.

JS: Yeah, so I remember as a child in southern Indiana seeing the old signs that said "Nigger don't let your black ass be in this town when the sun goes down." It was as bad in the twenties and thirties as it was in the Deep South. It was an abolition accident.

LF: Did civil rights reach Indiana at the same time that desegregation did?

JS: Ummmmm...

LF: Or were they separate?

JS: In Northern Indiana, was industrial and unionized and was just like Michigan, it was integrated but, but ummmm... population wise dominated by blacks so it wasn't an issue to the white power structure. Big huge neighborhoods were all black, so were the schools, were mainly black and they didn't bother to fight over whether they would be integrated or not because only the poor whites were going there but the rich people's kids were all going off to boarding schools or catholic schools that were not integrated or were... but that aside from the issues that we... ummmmm...

LF: Did they integrate by bussing or....

JS: Ummm... What did they do? They didn't need to, they integrated by opening the neighborhood schools. I think there wasn't any bussing. Ummmm... Did they bother? What did they do? I can't remember, again it was a sport in Indiana being the religion of Indiana being basketball. Ummm... the Indianapolis black school Crispus Attucks High School, named after the Boston Massacre black man, ummm... won the state championship three years in a row and then they integrated all the high schools and it was break up Crispus Attucks was the reason that they integrated all the high schools. They didn't want all the black players from the whole town to go to one high school cause nobody could beat them. [laughter] so they integrated all the high schools and then they had a lot of good teams. Instead of only one [laughter]

LF: That's really interesting

JS: But back to more questions about me and on back to North Carolina. I got my 2:00 class so this is my trouble here, since I stood you up on that half hour.

LF: How about where did you go to college?

JS: Ummm... I went to a little men's college called Wabash College in Crawfordsville, Indiana. It's one of the only two or three remaining all men's, you know. Its a private college, they don't accept any federal money so they weren't under pressure to integrate and become co-ed. Ummm... my experience with civil rights there...ummmmm... in my class Ben Davis, whose father was the first General officer of the Army or Air Force the first black officer to make it to the level of Major General, and he went to Wabash and it's the son that was in my class and he quite noticeably was not a member of a fraternity. About ninety percent of the kids that went to Wabash were members of fraternities. Ummmm.. they didn't even have dormitories. They built the first

dormitory while I was a freshman cause they finally had enough independents so that they had to have some place to put them. Otherwise they would have just grown up a little old place. The fraternity houses were houses ...ummmm... but the year I was a junior, my fraternity, I dropped out of the fraternity basically because the number one incoming freshman both on SAT's and athletics was black and a bunch of us because we were the number one fraternity on campus, said "We've got to have this kid." We've always said we have to have the number one kid on campus, you know, we didn't always get them but we identified who he is [laughter] and go try... you know. And this is the number one kid and a bunch of our alumni said well he might be the number one kid but if you take him it's the last of our money you will see and then we had a couple of seniors who said... the black ball system here.. if one active member of the fraternity says no then its "No" there's no majority vote on pledges if somebody says "I don't want this one". That respective is what a couple of them said and we had chapter meetings where we said "Come on guys you know you're bigots cut it out." and they said "Well we know we're bigots but we were raised bigots and to be true to my family I have got to be a bigot I can't let this guy in here you know we don't like 'Niggers' in our family." And some of us stomped out and said well you know if you can do without him you can do without us ...ummmm... and that happened at Wabash in enough places so that that guy was pledged by a new chapter of a fraternity that had never been on campus before a bunch of guys got together and wrote to... God I can't remember who it was... do we have SAE's here. Sigma Alpha ?

JM: Yeah.

JS: I think it was SAE's. I think a bunch of guys maybe had an uncle or a cousin who was an SAE wrote to SAE we want this guy he's the best guy and we're all people who come from ...ummmm... from this fraternity and that fraternity. I was a Beta and we know that we're, that we're not trustworthy that we're apostates because we quit. We're quitting our fraternity, which was like being a traitor [laughter]. But what everybody is doing is wrong and so we want to found a new chapter and are you guys open minded enough to back us up and whoever it was did it. Now I got married at that point so I didn't join that chapter. But I knew what was going on. That's the kind of things that were going on while I was coming through the system. Then I went to ...ummm... I transferred for my senior year because it was a men's school and I was married and I wanted my wife to go back to school. I transferred to Indiana University for my senior year and then I stayed there and got my Ph D in Chinese ...ummm... that would be between 1962 and 1968. I was in Bloomington, Indiana, which is in southern Indiana the year before I went there they had integrated the barbershops and the first to integrate the barbershop got a stripe down the middle of his head and then was told that they were closing up the shop for the rest of the day. But when they showed up at their shop the next day there were like 400 people out front and not letting them in the door [laughter] so you will now cut people's hair or regardless of your opinion or else you will not have a job anymore. We are not burning down your store but you are not going to work in here unless you do otherwise. I am very proud of Indiana. It was very progressive. The town was old KKK country but the students were hip and told the town "Thou shalt not be that way anymore." [laughter]

LF: When did you move to Chapel Hill?

JS: Ummmmm... 68 yeah 1968. So, I suspect, my oldest child was born in 1967. So he was going along when we came here. He was born in November 1967. It seems to me like the first couple of years that we were here the Lincoln School, down where the town offices are, where they are, that the Lincoln school was still in operation. Am I right? How long was it?

LF: Yeah I think it closed down fully in '71.

JS: And it was even later we lived in town for two years then we moved out in the country in Chatham County And then we sent our kids to, including my adopted daughter who is African American, so that's, I don't know whether you knew that or not ...

LF: I didn't know that until you told me.

JS: Here's my family [showing picture from desk of his family] [laughter]...

LF: They don't have heads... [one picture had a picture over the heads of the one below]

JS: One of them is () [laughter] ...uhhhh... that's my oldest son and his girlfriend, that's my second son, and that's my daughter, and that's my wife and then that's me.

LF: That's you. How old are they?

JS: Ummmmmm... They are, the oldest one was born in '67 so he would be 34 this year. He is 33 now, the brother is 31, the sister is a half-year younger than that. She'll be 31 in May.

LF: So, they are pretty close in age.

JS: Yeah, Ummmmmm they all went to Green Willow. Which I don't know if you have heard of Green Willow school or not?

JM: No....

JS: Green Willow was a hippie alternative school...ummm.. with huge, a huge emphasis on ...ummm...damn....the headache pills are getting to me...[laughter] I just can't find the right words...ummmmm... with economic issues rather than racial issues it was pay what you can afford. The idea was to get people in that couldn't afford private schooling and ...uhhh... a couple times we had doctors so we had people who brought in big money and I was making good money at hippie times. I wasn't getting paid very much for a hippie school. I was at regular income and had three children and I had to pay for all of that. I made a deal when we brought our African American child I said "Look you guys you need to be integrated and I can't afford to send all three of my kids to Green Willow because we are out of money, so I'm doing you a favor and you're not charging me anything and you are here by integrated"

LF: Was she the first black student?

JS: Yeah, it was only because there wasn't anybody interested. It was hippie and for those of us who knew black people they were people who were our own age who didn't have kids old enough yet. And the local black people were very conservative afraid of hippies. Afraid they were going to get in trouble if they messed around with the hippies. Because they thought we had long hair and probably did drugs [laughter] and were not good allies if you got arrested by the sheriff, right . Because the sheriff was going to beat them up first

JM: Ummm... Wow.

JS: It was not like being friends with the Episcopalians or something like that.

JM: Where was Green Willow?

JS: Green Willow... was in the parsonage of the church... what's the church over on Purefoy or on the other side of the church... of the Community church. Is that what it's called? Now?

LF: What road is it on?

JS: Purefoy? It's the road that runs up from Merritt's Grocery Store up at the corner of ...ummmm... Purefoy and Mason Farm. There is a church up there and they have all kinds of... they do music they got ...uhhh...how do I describe it...they're one of the places where they do their religious services...it is a Christian church. It is also obviously set up to be an auditorium so they've always done folk music and ...ummmm... progressive issue oriented protest music and something. But anyway it was a church and they had a parsonage but it was down in a place that was so shady that the parsons didn't want to live in it. [laughter] And so they rented it to us and we ran the school there for six or seven years.

LF: Did you and your wife help run the school [Green Willow]?

JS: Ahhhhhh, it was a co-op so we were on the board of directors but only because it was one of those incidences where nobody wants to do it. [laughter] And there wasn't any pay and..

JM: How many students went to this school [Green Willow]?

JS: Ummmmmm.... I suppose it topped out somewhere between 20 and 25, eventually it had in addition to my daughter two other African Americans who came from a commune that was north of town about half way to Hillsborough. And then ...ummmm... and an African American boy whose parents lived in Raleigh and brought him all the way over here to go to school but it was really. Well the school was

beginning to have it's problems at that point, it was beginning to fall apart because the teachers for several years were fresh hippie graduates of UNC who would work for almost nothing and weren't being paid a salary. And we didn't have anything to, like we had a lot of people going there who didn't have regular incomes and we probably had a budget of \$1,000 a month to pay the rent and the teachers. Like sometimes it was like real old time out in the frontiers, sometimes people would pay their tuition by bringing a bushel of potatoes or bags of beans and rice. It was a need you gotta have fun. And all of the teachers went on to do other interesting things after they were done being teachers there and a lot of the kids went on too, including kids whose parents were not college graduates or not academics. They anyway went on to do interesting things academically, have successes and not turn back into working class or hippie druggies. When my kids finally went to public school when the school collapsed we had been living in the country and we rented our house in the country to some grad students and rented a house in town so our kids could go to Chapel Hill schools for free. [laughter]

JM: Right

JS: Because we didn't want our kids to go to Pittsboro schools. Because they only had then just got integrated and there was trouble on the school buses. So we were sending my sixth grader and fourth grader boys and my third grader girl on the school bus. And then our daughter also had asthma so she had to come home from school often and we were in Chapel Hill, both my wife and I were in Chapel Hill, and Pittsboro is a long way off. So we moved here and went to the school here and all three of the kids, the teachers told us after the first month or so that they expected our kids to be real problems because they knew that had gone to this real hippie school, Green Willow, and then it

turned out that they were all leaders and they were intellectual leaders, but they were all also social leaders. Tammy was not going to be treated any different from anybody else and there was a lot of black kids in the school that were still scared and they didn't know white kids except in the school. Tammy was a kid and she wasn't going to take anything from anybody and my oldest...ummmmm... his sixth grade teacher immediately saw that he was the one white kid in the class who wasn't prejudiced and he stuck him with the two black boys in the class that were making trouble because they were not accepting prejudice. They were reacting violently to being pushed and called names and so on and so forth. And the teacher was cool enough...what was that guy's name? Terry..... ummmmm.....dang.... Ephesus School on Ephesus Church road.....Terry Greenland. Have you heard the name?

LF: No.

JM: No.

JS: Ok, well, he was one of the good...one of the good guys in actually getting the job done on the ground in the Chapel Hill school systems. He even like supported, took the black kids that weren't going to make it, made sure they that got some extra help and he gave them extra help like. In fact I remember one kid that he paid his way to a boarding school for high school, because he knew he wasn't going to make it under the social pressure here and he was a bright kid who was going to make it if he got out.

LF: And what elementary school did they go to?

JS: Um [pause] Ephesus, which is Ephesus on Ephesus Church Road up the hill from the Holiday Inn up by Eastgate.

LF: I know where that is. How do you spell it?

JS: E-P-H-E [pause] Let me find it. [laugh] E-S-U-S

LF: E-P-H—

JS: Just a second, let me find it. Schools, they got schools in the yellow pages?

LF: I think so.

JS: Looking [pause].

LF: Were there any African-American teachers in the schools?

JS: Um, by the time my kids went, which would be between 1975 and 1980, yeah, there were a lot of black teachers. They took all the black teachers out of Lincoln and integrated them in, but they also went out and got more—Ephesus—a lot of good black teachers. Obviously they did recruiting to get—.

LF: Yeah.

JS: You can say maybe there was a lot of self interest in that when the upper middle class and academic community saw that the faculties were going to get integrated they were no longer satisfied, or they were aware that the teachers at Lincoln School, though some of them were great, some of them were semi-literate. Um [pause] so they said okay we gonna, if we're gonna have to have black teachers, we better go out and get the cream of the crop, so some, some of their teachers, some of their very best teachers were young black teachers who we'd obviously brought out and really competed to get them.

LF: Were there many black professors?

JS: Okay, coming--.

LF: Here at that time.

JS: Here at UNC?

LF: Yeah.

JS: Uh, jeez, no.

LF: No?

JS: No [pause] Jackson, nobody else.

LF: What did he teach?

JS: English.

LF: English?

JS: Yeah, and was an old man already. And I'm not sure how long he'd been--. I think he had been here when, before the school was integrated. I think he was on the faculty before the student body was--.

LF: Do you know what year the student body was integrated? When the first black students--.

JS: '65. When was it integrated in terms of made co-educational?

LF: In the seventies, right? Or late sixties.

JS: Yeah, maybe it was '68, but maybe it was '65. No, I don't know. I don't remember the exact dates, but it was in the sixties.

LF: It all happened at once. [laughter]

JS: Yeah. Yeah, well there was that thing. There were women who for forty years had been saying, "We want to go to Chapel Hill and not just for dates on the weekends."

LF: Yeah.

JM: Yeah. [laughter]

JS: From Meredith, or UNC-G, um and then when the federal government said you will let black people in, then a lot of southern ladies said to their husbands, "You're gonna let niggers into that school, but you're not gonna let my daughter into that school? You think you're ever going to sleep with me again?" [laughter] Um, there was a whole lot of that, well which if you think about it, there was a whole lot of that in the suffrage movement—came from the freeing of the slaves from 1870 to 1900. There was a whole lot of white women saying, "Look, you just freed black people and everybody knows they are inferior. Am I inferior and you are not making me free?"

LF: So, they used it as their catalyst?

JS: Yeah, right. [pause] Um, I am sorry I pushed you into such a small amount of time. It didn't have to be this rushed, and I could give you, you know--

LF: Well, we could come back maybe next week.

JS: May actually be a good idea. Yeah, we can also go on talking now.

LF: Yeah.

JS: Five or ten minutes, I just have to show up in class.

LF: You can make them wait. [laughter]

JS: Yeah, well--

LF: I'm just kidding.

JS: They'll wait.

LF: Did most professors send their students to Chapel Hill public schools, or to private schools?

JS: Um [pause] there was the Friends school.

LF: Down on--

JS: Well actually, the Friends school is out in the country. I don't know if it is in Orange County or Durham County. It is over by the Orange-Durham line, up about seven miles north of Franklin Street and then off to the east. Um, it got started around that time and it was an alternative school. Part of the reason was to integrate, but a lot of the reason was the same reason as um, as our little Green Willow School. People not being satisfied with conventional education, not just satisfied with conventional southern education, which was even worse than conventional, it really was still repudiating evolution and being explicitly Christian. Which is fine with me if you want to be Christian, but don't cause the Jewish people and the Muslim people and the non-believers, and so-on-and-so-forth to have to say prayers every fifteen minutes. [laughter] Um, lot of faculty member children went there. There was of course the Christian school academy movement, and a lot of staff and local people sent their kids to segregated schools, basically like those from around here. Um [pause] this area is progressive enough so that a lot of those just went belly-up in about two years. Just didn't take very long at all for people to see that they couldn't get the quality of education they wanted if they were going to make leaving black people out the most important part. They couldn't—just like our little school—they couldn't come up with the money. () So then the, the schools, the public schools integrated relatively successfully. I could tell you stories about my daughter. [pause] Friends school stayed because it was associated with the Friends who were strong. The local Quaker fellowship was a very effective thing, so Friends school stayed and got a good reputation. Um, Durham Academy took over and Durham Academy --. Durham Academy took over and a lot of the people who would have been in Christian academies--. Without being fundamentalist, they went for

conventional sort of dress-up, upper-middle class; let's have good manners, kind of-- Which definitely when it started was fueled by both the um, the kind of thing that Green Willow and Friends School were threatening conventional people with. A () education that was going to make the children different from their parents, but also by the fact that there were going to be black people in public schools. Okay, so there were-- It was conservative, but not violently racist.

JM: Were the schools like K through 12?

JS: Yeah, well Durham Academy is still there and functioning, you know, very effectively. Being a real good school, um the traditional private school; pay the teachers better, get better quality teachers. Um, put a lot of emphasis on, on um, like I said conventional behavior. Being well dressed, being well groomed, being quiet, and so-on-and-so-forth. The conventional things that you expect from private schools. No special emphasis on [pause] "our great southern heritage", that is to say. [laughter] They are not racist, it's integrated multi-faith, it's just upper class, snooty snooty, typical--

LF: What you think of when you think of private--

JS: Nose in the air private school, right. [laughter] Very good place to send your kids if you want them to get into a really good college, but you don't really care if they learn anything. [laughter]

LF: Just as long as they get into college [laughter]. I'd like to ask you more about your daughter. I know we don't have much time, since you have to class, but--

JS: Uh [pause].

LF: We could wait until next--

JS: Yeah, probably be better. Wait until next time.

LF: Okay.

JS: Um, yeah, there are (), there are a couple things that show that racism was quite alive and well in the school ten years ago when she was a senior in high school. And there are experiences because of getting to hang out with my daughter for fifteen years. I got to be, um, "black" in some people's eyes and um--.

LF: Community-wise or--?

JS: Um, generally speaking this community thinks that it's cool if, that-that it is good that you are liberal, that you're progressive if you—black and white people are together. But in specific, if you go into the Burger King, or if you go into a filling station down in Chatham County, uh, you can still run into people that will just turn around and say, "Hey nigger lover". And I can't pronounce it correctly. [laughter]

LF: That's okay, you're forgiven.

JS: They're still there and ah, I never had an opportunity to respond with the full gauge of my—[laughter]. My authentic response always had to be withheld because I had to worry about what would happen to my daughter if ah [laughter], if I wasn't able to kill all three of them first onslaught.

LF: Well, if we come back next week sometime, we can talk about the politics of it.

JS: Yeah.

LF: And her experience.

JS: Yeah, I'm happy. Um, am I going to be anonymous in what you're doing?

LF: If you want to be you can. You can be anonymous.

JS: Um, Can I see what you're going to say?

LF: Mmmm Hmmm.

JS: And that would not be because there was anything I say that I wouldn't say in public, but only because having been interviewed for like newspaper things, and that kind of stuff.

LF: Oh yeah.

JS: I know that misinterpreting one word of what I say could get you thinking--.

JM: Yeah.

JS: Could get you thinking some way so you write a whole paragraph that, while it makes perfectly good sense, if it wasn't my intention--.

LF: Yeah.

JS: And usually that kind of thing can be turned around by just turning a word here and a word there. It's not like I am going to say, "Throw that ten pages out. I refuse to be responsible."

LF: Yeah.

JS: I can say, "Okay, I would rather be anonymous this ten pages and this is where I think I would agree with it." I would be happy to do that.

LF: Yeah, definitely.

JM: Yeah.

JS: Okay.

JM: We have forms you can fill out where you can like restrict the tape, who can listen to the tape or not.

JS: Yeah.

LF: And we can bring those probably next time ().

JS: Okay.

END OF INTERVIEW.