

TAPE 1, SIDE A ONLY

1/17/09

BRUCE ROBERTS (BR): My name is Bruce Roberts. I'm the photographer of the pictures that are hanging [on exhibit] around here.

Peggy Van Scoyoc (PV): Tell me about your career.

(BR): I came to North Carolina in 1955 to work for the Hamlet News Messenger as a photographer. It was probably one of the smallest papers in North Carolina. I started there, and then a year or so later, I got an offer from the Charlotte Observer. So I went to Charlotte as a staff photographer for that paper there. And that's basically how I learned photography, was on the job training. Pete McKnight, the editor of the Charlotte Observer, hired one of the great photo staffs, and we really learned from each other. It was very good experience. Every one of the photographers, I guess there was six or seven, were all offered jobs from various magazines. They all went to work for National Geographic, for Life, and later for People magazine. I went there, () first director of photography and helped to start the magazine.

But in the time period in the late sixties, I was freelancing for various New York magazines, Time, Life, Sports Illustrated assignments and so forth. A lot of it was the civil rights assignments in the South.

PV: Were you mostly concentrated in North Carolina, or was it the whole South?

BR: It was the whole South. I think the worst job that I got in that time period was, I was assigned to photograph for George Wallace's presidential campaign. I didn't know it at the time, but Time really wasn't interested in many pictures of George Wallace's campaign. They wanted to have a photographer there in case he got shot.

PV: Were you there when he was shot?

BR: No I wasn't because it happened about two years later, after the campaign was over. I have 10,000 pictures of George Wallace campaigning. It was like being between two sides. One side of the street was his supporters and on the other side was all the anti-Wallace supporters. You just hoped they didn't start fighting each other while you were there. It was really a pretty chaotic campaign. But about halfway through the campaign, he got Secret Service protection and they got the thing organized, so you had some semblance of order. But not a single one of my pictures was published. Actually, the press paid for Wallace's plane. They sold tickets on the campaign plane for like \$12,000 for the campaign. That's how much they wanted somebody there. It was an interesting experience.

PV: I bet. So you were telling me how – tell me the story about the pictures you took in Raleigh, when there was a demonstration going on outside of the, what became a theater after the Civil War...

BR: Oh, that was in Charlotte. That was an interesting... That demonstration followed perhaps a week or two after the sit-ins which then they closed the lunch counters for about a month and then they worked out an agreement to reopen it. The next thing, and I guess the last really physical sign in downtown Charlotte of segregation was the fact that the theaters in downtown, the blacks had to sit upstairs and the whites had to sit downstairs. The demonstrators had signs saying that they wanted to be treated equally. They were going back, I guess about twenty of them, in front of the theater. The theater building was one of the older buildings on Tryon Street in Charlotte, and at one time back in 1854 it apparently had been a bank building. It was the place where the last meeting of the Confederate cabinet was held. As you know, the cabinet left Richmond and probably got down to Charlotte when the final surrender of Joe Johnston was authorized as the last business. The interesting thing about that particular spot was

that when Jefferson Davis came out of the building at the end of the meeting, he was greeted by a dispatch writer who told him that Lincoln had been assassinated. So that spot was marked with a kind of a bronze plaque embedded in the concrete sidewalk. Here were the demonstrators just a few feet away. There were some white teenagers who were kind of heckling the demonstrators and throwing pennies at them. It was most interesting to see the pennies roll around by the feet and Lincoln's face was all over the place. I thought well, that's kind of the alpha and omega of things. I don't think that photo ever got published, but it was just a personal experience for me to see that.

When I walked back to the Charlotte Observer, I passed () the office supply store, and I went in to see if they were still selling white and colored signs for bathrooms. They had one set left and I bought it. If you want to see it, it is now at the Charlotte Museum.

PV: So they sold those signs as a set in office supply stores?

BR: Yes. I grew up in New York, so I guess I had not realized how quiet segregation was when I first came down here. Suzy had the same experience, even though she was born in the South. She said that she hadn't really thought about it until the demonstrations came. I think many of us were that way.

When I moved to Birmingham, there is such a difference between North Carolina and Alabama in that the old South is still there in Alabama, whereas North Carolina just had a different feel about it. A large part of that, I think, is that it was small farms and not the big plantations and so forth.

PV: What was the expression you told me awhile ago about North Carolina?

BR: Oh yeah, North Carolina, I was told when I came here, was a "valley of humility between two mountains of conceit," (Virginia and South Carolina.) When I got to Alabama, ()

was editor. Now, he said, If there's one thing I've got to tell you, football is not a matter of life and death down here, although you may think otherwise. But it really is far more important.

PV: You were telling me, you were sent to cover the Ku Klux Klan in the city?

BR: Yes, I had an assignment from Life. Life was interested in doing a Klan story, and did considerable research on where the best constant Klan people could be found. It turned out it was the Klan in Natchez, the very famous tourist town. I met a reporter from Life at the airport, we drove up. We were both a little nervous about this. But anyway, the Klan took us out in the woods. This was the only mounted Klan outfit in America.

PV: So they were on horseback?

BR: Yes, they were on horseback. They had beautiful robes. They had the red robe and they had a green robe for the Grand Dragon. The red robe was for the minister.

PV: And the rest were in white? The working Klan?

BR: Yes, the rest were white. Going to a Klan rally, you always had prayers. It really is amazing how religion gets mixed in to that.

PV: You were telling me that in Mississippi, it was the only state where it was legal to cover their faces?

BR: Yes. Progress was being made in the sixties in most states that passed laws that the Klan could not wear face masks.

PV: They couldn't cover their faces?

BR: Couldn't cover their faces for pogroms, or whatever. But in Mississippi they could. We saw the first one come in. It was really a spectacular shot. It was springtime and the green of the leaves were just coming out. You had these wonderful green and red and white robes. And I knew I had the cover on this one. So I shot it in vertical, and it was just the most perfect cover

shot. We had the film back to the airport and shipped up to New York. I was just sure I had the cover. But for the first time ever, Life sold a pull-out ad so it turned the cover into a horizontal format. All my pictures were vertical. So they decided to move this wonderful picture to the opening of the News section. Back in '65, Life was about half printed in black and white and half in color. That first page was a black and white page, so all of the picture appeared in Life as a black and white picture opening the story.

PV: You must have been very disappointed, to say the least.

BR: Yes. That was the only chance I had for a Life cover and I blew it for not doing a horizontal.

PV: Have you done anything with that picture since? Is it in a museum somewhere?

BR: Oh, it's been in some books, in color. The thing I remember the most about a Klan meeting in North Carolina in Salisbury was that the textile mills were beginning to be integrated. So the whole pitch, the Klan was always trying to take advantage of any opportunity for members, because that meant money. So they were saying, "Well, if you join the Klan, we'll stop the textile mills from being integrated."

PV: Were they successful in doing that in some cases?

BR: I don't think so. I think they would promise anything to get members.

PV: So that was happening in Salisbury? Throughout the Piedmont and all the mills that were down there?

BR: Yes. But actually the best story about a Klan rally was a few years earlier when I was down in Maxton, near Hamlet. The Klan decided that they would burn a cross in front of an Indian home. The Lumbee Indians down that way, the Lumbee Indians, I think, are a mixture of Indians and Lost Colony, because some of the same names appear in the Lumbee Indian tribe.

The Lumbees didn't like the idea of the Klan coming down there. So I got this call from the Grand Dragon at the time. He had a field outside of Maxton and had everybody there. They had a loudspeaker and they had a hundred watt light bulb over the platform with a generator. But the Lumbees lived around there, and they had worked out an agreement with the sheriff. If they wouldn't aim low and hit the Klan, they could shoot in the air. So when the Grand Dragon started to talk, the first shot hit the light bulb and plunged the Klan into darkness. Now all around in the woods, you could hear gunshots. The Klansmen threw off their robes and fled. The story goes that the Grand Dragon had to pay a black man to drive them out of the area to his car for \$10.00.

I thought, you know, I really wish that the Lumbee Indians would get grand status. They stood up to the Klan. The one thing that the Klan could not stand was to be laughed at. So the Lumbee Indians picked up the Klan robes, and a bunch of them drove up to the Charlotte Observer and burst into the newsroom. It just about frightened everybody. But Morey Rosen, who was the only photographer left in Charlotte, because everybody else was down trying to photograph the rally, got the picture that ran in Life of the Indians dressed up in the Klan robes. He shot it from the back so you could see the cross and all that stuff. The Indians were just turning around and smiling at the camera. It became kind of an icon of absolute humiliation to the Klan. And that's what everybody wanted, and the Klan never really recovered from that affect. They got laughed out of Eastern North Carolina.

PV: Where exactly was the rally? It was in the woods near?

BR: Near Maxton, North Carolina.

PV: That's a great story. Do you know of much activity that was going on in Raleigh itself, or demonstrations, or riots, or anything like that?

BR: No because I was living in Charlotte, and there were activities out there. Then we were pretty wrapped up in the schools.

PV: But nothing comes to mind of Raleigh itself? Pretty quiet here?

BR: Yes, I guess so. Greensboro probably had the more violent things.

PV: Along with the Woolworth lunch counter sit-in in Greensboro, there were other things in Greensboro as well?

BR: Yes, there was confrontation which I think someone was actually killed in Greensboro. After the sit-ins and the theaters were open, Charlotte had the reputation of being a very moderate and pro-sensible course. South Carolina, of course, had the big fight over the confederate flag on the capital.

PV: They are still fighting that one. So there was the Greensboro sit-in, and then you were telling me the next day there was the one in Charlotte that never really happened.

BR: Well, nothing really happened, except it was the end of integrated lunch counters.

PV: So it worked.

BR: It worked, yes. It was probably the most successful in the sense that there was no violence and it did not get headlines, but it brought about the results that everybody wanted.

PV: So all the stores closed down the lunch counters for about a month, you said?

BR: Yes, it was about a month. Then they quietly reopened them and served everybody.

PV: But they were now integrated when they reopened them? And it was about a month later that the theaters ended up becoming integrated as well?

BR: Yes.

PV: Did they have to close those down for a time before they reopened, or did they just quietly ...

BR: No, they just quietly did it. The other change really was that all the segregated bathroom signs disappeared.

PV: Just quietly started disappearing.

BR: Yes. One of the pictures of mine that got used a lot, it ran a double page in a book on the South that Life published, was a picture of a bathroom in South Carolina in which you had three doors. One said Men, Ladies, and Colored. And that was common back then.

PV: So the colored bathrooms were unisex?

BR: Yes. But you know, it was rather than Gentlemen and Ladies, or Men and Women, it always seemed to read, Men, Ladies and Colored.

PV: What about signs over the water fountains? Just Whites and Coloreds, or...

BR: Yes, well they were usually in different locations too. You know, you didn't think about it. Or at least I didn't when I first came down. It was just kind of accepted.

PV: The way it had always been and nobody questioned it?

BR: Yes.

PV: But you were watching it change right before your eyes, right in front of your camera.

BR: Yes. I always thought that the Lumbee Indians should have some kind of remembrance for what they did, because

PV: It took courage.

BR: It really did. The absolute ruination of the Klan was really what things when changed in the eastern part of the state.

PV: Do you remember, or were you aware of the big billboard out on the highway going into Zebulon or Wendell? It was up until maybe the early 90s that said “home of the Ku Klux Klan.”

BR: No, but there was a sign on the South Carolina line that said “the KKK welcomes you to South Carolina.”

PV: Scary stuff. So you took a lot of pictures throughout the South, throughout the whole Civil Rights movement all over the South.

BR: Yes, mostly Mississippi and South Carolina, North Carolina. I remember when they started integrating schools, particularly in South Carolina. A lot of the towns started private schools for the white kids and the blacks got the old white schools. It was kind of a strange time. Fortunately we’ve gone beyond that.

PV: Definitely, what was going on? The white students who couldn’t afford private schools, what did they do? Did they end up having to attend the integrated public schools with mostly black children?

BR: Well, in the smaller places, I think there were some special arrangements made so that all of the whites could go together in their own school.

PV: So they financially helped each other out?

BR: Yes. What was so strange. Originally it had been “separate by equal” ruling in the Supreme Court. I thought, what really has happened here is that the blacks have gotten the good equipment and the good schools and the whites were not, out of their own choice.

PV: Well, those were great stories. Thank you so much. I really appreciate it.

PV: Will you tell me your name?

Shirlene Robinson (SR): Shirlene Robinson.

PV: Hi Shirlene. What story do you have to tell me about Civil Rights?

SR: I have a story to tell about Civil Rights. I grew up in New York, Syracuse, New York, upstate area. I wanted to get away from the South. But during those times during the sixties, our school had to be relocated. We were reassigned, basically. We were reassigned to go to a beautiful new school that was built outside of the city. So we went.

The first day, we pulled up in the buses and they were throwing eggs at our buses. I couldn't believe it. We had to be escorted off the buses for several weeks. I was thinking, we're in New York, I'm not in the South. This went on for awhile. They accepted that we were going to stay, but they still weren't our friends yet. After that, I was in the ninth grade at that time, and my sister and brother were going to school as well. We were all in the same school. My other sister was in the twelfth grade, my brother was in eleventh grade. They graduated out. I was in the tenth grade, and I remember going to my counselor. I said I wanted to go to college and I wanted to take college prep courses. She told me, well your brother and sister didn't go to college, so I don't think you're going to be going to college. I think it would be better for you to stay in the business area so that you can become a secretary or a bookkeeper, because you're good at record-keeping. Well, I thought that was kind of harsh and not what I wanted to do with my life.

So then I went to the office. I talked to other counselors, other teachers, and they told me she was my counselor so I had to deal with her. Well, I went home and I talked with my parents. My dad said, she's probably right because I don't have money to pay. I couldn't help your brother get into school. At this time, do you remember the ENC program? The opportunity

grants that came out? We were starting to be able to get those grants to go to college. At that time they were coming out. I told him that and he said, well, I don't have money to pay, so see if you can get a grant. My mom said, your teacher is probably right because you're going to find you a nice husband and you're going to raise children. My mom's a real southerner.

But to make a long story short, I just thank God that I lived through high school, and I was unable to take the college prep courses. So I tried to get in the back door of Syracuse University. They told me because I hadn't prepared for college, I had to go through some courses for about two years. So I went to technical school. I graduated from there in about a year, and I became a mainframe operator. You remember mainframes, right? And I have had an IT career ever since. I am thankful that I was able to get a career even though I was held back because of racial issues. In the end, God called me into college. When he sent me to college, I went for biblical studies. I do have a degree in Christian history.

PV: Where did you get your degree?

SR: I got my degree from () College in Charlotte, North Carolina.

PV: So you had to come south to get an education?

SR: Yes. And I say, yes we can, lead by the power of the Holy Spirit, we can do all things through Christ's gift of love. So I don't hold any grudges. I just look at it as an experience, and as my cross to bear. And my life is full now.

PV: That's fabulous. Thank you so much.

PV: First of all, tell me your name.

Mary Shelton (MS): Mary Shelton.

PV: Mary, what story do you have to tell me about Civil Rights, or...

MS: It is about Civil Rights in a way. My mama is black and my father is white. They were born here in North Carolina. They were not allowed to get married here, so they moved to Michigan when both sets of parents died, on both sides. They wouldn't get permission. They met at the only school for the deaf, the Governor Morehead School. They stayed there nine months out of the year, and then they went back to their perspective farms three months a year. They didn't get married until they were in their thirties. They were married sixty-one years. My mama is still alive, she is 95. My dad passed away in '98 at age 88. Where I buried him, in Colfax, North Carolina, he is buried next to his mom and dad in a private cemetery. Even though they lived all these years married, his family said she cannot be buried next to him. That was in 1998. So it really does my heart good to know that we have elected a black president, so after all these years there are, some progress. That's a huge step, I think. It is a huge, huge step. So I'm really pleased about that.

PV: So now, your folks, you said, were at the school for the deaf?

MS: Yes, they were both deaf and mute.

PV: Oh, they both were. How did they meet?

MS: At the school for the deaf.

PV: Oh, that's where they met.

MS: There was only one, and it was not segregated. They had only one school, and they stayed there nine months out of the year. And then for three months they went back to their

perspective farms. My father was from Colfax and my mother was from Williamston. So they waited until both sets of parents died, got married in Michigan and were married sixty-one years.

PV: That's phenomenal. What did they do for a living?

MS: My mom didn't work. She was a housewife. My dad made ball bearings for cars. But what he learned here was being a carpenter. He built his own home when he was sixty-five. So it was just amazing that he could remember all those carpentry skills from North Carolina. And I ended up here. I ended up here, even though I was born in Michigan, I lived in California and then, now I live here. So it is great.

PV: What a great story. Thank you so much.

MS: It is a great story.

PV: First tell me your name, and then just start telling me your story.

Bob Pierce (BP): My name is Bob Pierce. I am a resident of Cary, North Carolina. I will be 70 years old this year. I have a diverse background and have lived in many, many places including abroad, lots of countries around the world as well as the United States. I've been fortunately fairly well educated. And I can tell you honestly that I came from very austere beginnings, a very, very poor family. My dad died when I was a little boy and my mom was poorly educated and had medical problems. She drove us around, my sister and I, around the country. Because of that, I ended up spending a good bit of my youth in Newark, New Jersey.

For those of you who might not know, Newark has always been a very, very tough city. Very tough, like a Detroit or like an L.A. or like a Chicago, lots of gangs. Back in the forties, there was no such thing as separate schools. The realities were that everything was integrated. So the only things that were separate were neighborhoods. So you might have a black neighborhood within the city, or you might have a Chinese neighborhood in the city, or an Italian one in the city, but when we all got to school, everyone was just together. You had a playground and everybody played together. It was not uncommon to call each other names. Chinese kids were called "chinks." Puerto Rican kids were called "spiks," and Italian kids were called "whaps," and so on. But there was no hatred when you spoke the name. It was more of a group identity. When you said, "Yo spiks, you wanna play here. You wanna go play wall ball? You wanna play stickball?" And somebody else would laugh and say, "Yea, yea so and so." It was rare that you had any kind of real confrontation, person to person. So what I experienced when I grew up in that environment was a perception of, pretty much equality, pretty much acceptance, pretty much not hatred. But you got along, because you went to school together, you played together, and that's just how it was.

Having the good fortune to be plucked out of that city environment and shipped upstate New York to go board with some people because I was becoming a hoodlum right down in Newark, I got exposed to more middle American values in upstate New York. Again, there was really no racism or bigotry and those kinds of things. Having graduated from that high school environment, I went on to a college environment, which was again was without racism and so forth.

I entered the Air Force in 1962 and my first assignment as a young lieutenant Biloxi, Mississippi. For the first time in my life, I came to understand what true racism was all about, and what true bigotry was all about. Having the opportunity to see with my own eyes billboards that said, "N____, if you find yourself in this town after sundown, you're gonna be dead." Actually having signs of that nature on billboards, and actually walking into a public facility that had a black entrance and a white entrance, and having doctors who wouldn't see black people, and the use of the "N" word rampant...

To give you a little idea about the naivety of the northeasterner, my young wife at the time came down with me. We were in temporary quarters and had to do some laundry. So we pulled up in front of the Laundromat. I had a little baby, so I was going to keep the baby. My wife went in to do the laundry. She took all our clothes. In a very short time she came back out. I said, "Honey, what's the matter?" She said, "Well, we can't do our laundry here." I said, "What do you mean, we can't do our laundry?" She said, "I brought all the clothes." I said, "What do you mean, you brought all the clothes?" She said, "I brought the white clothes, I brought the colored clothes. And there is a big sign in there and it says, 'No colored.' It's a big sign and it says 'No colored.' You can't do colored clothes in there." I give you this little story to give you a feel for how innocent and how naïve the typical person from the Northeast was about what the

real conditions were in the South. So in my tour of duty at Biloxi, Keesler Air Force Base, young black officers who were assigned were not permitted to live off the base because it was too dangerous. There were incidents in the paper every day that were absolutely absurd. Stories about how black people had done so and so, and were tried and were convicted in a matter of hours. Stories about hangings and the KKK was still active in the adjoining states, as well as Mississippi. Well, that was a big eye-opener, obviously.

Then, the good news was that within the ranks of the military, truly an organization that was without prejudism by regulation. I don't care who the person was or where they came from. Once you got in the military, you were not allowed to in any way, shape, or form practice prejudism or show prejudicial behavior or racist behavior subject to court-marshal. You were not allowed to do that. Now that doesn't mean that some didn't exist, and we all know that. But it was certainly behind the scenes, and nothing that was in the open. The good news in addition was, that a black person really did have recourse in the military. They have something called the inspector-general office, and if a black person really had bad treatment, he had a way with impunity to go complain to the IG. And IG would investigate. Even in Mississippi, that gave a young black person a chance to be heard as opposed to be hung, shot, killed or whatever.

PV: Even in 1962?

RP: Even in 1962. So throughout my military career, it was just routine and accepted that prejudism was just not allowed. And I never saw that. Black officers got promoted right along with white, all depending upon experience, education, talent, ability and so on. It was truly a merit system, and you got promoted if you did your job the best that you could.

Now having said all that, and gone into other careers after I retired from the military in industry, once again I got into a situation where I didn't see very much of it. And then I had an

occasion to come to Cary, North Carolina. This was in about the 1985 timeframe. Once again, I had my eyes blown wide open and my heart broken, because having thought that I was now in a northern state, more or less, even though it's a Carolina, thinking I was beyond all that, come to find out that in 1986 or 7, I'm not quite sure which year, I came to find out that the Crowsdale Country Club over in Durham was an all-white organization. So until that year, 1987, no black person had ever been allowed to be a member at Crowsdale. Only through some political campaigning, through some community pressures were a black person actually allowed to become a member of a country club in North Carolina.

Having said all that, that is probably enough of my little story to illustrate the wide range of things that I experienced over my life. I would like to conclude my remarks by just saying that, sitting here in the Page-Walker, participating in the Martin Luther King celebration, we just had a beautiful entertainer sing us a song about meeting each other halfway, and living our lives together, I am hoping and praying that we will have initiatives in the future that focus on Americanism. Americanism, what it takes to be a great American. I have had it up to my eyebrows with racists, with separatists, with somebody who thinks their gang is better than your gang, and all that kind of stuff. I'm hoping with our new president, that that will become a true reality, and Americanism will prevail. Thank you for letting me talk to you.

PV: Thank you. That was fabulous.

END OF SPOT INTERVIEWS