

Interview

with

LUTHER HARBERT MOORE

November 20, 2003

by Malinda Maynor

Transcribed by Sharon Caughill

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

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START OF TAPE 1, SIDE A

LUTHER HARBERT MOORE  
November 20, 2003

MALINDA MAYNOR: This is tape 11.20.03-LHM. We're here with Mr. Luther Harbert Moore in the Prospect community. The interviewer is Malinda Maynor. Okay. So, Mr. Moore, maybe if we could start out telling us a little bit about what you see and what you saw at that time as some of the benefits and drawbacks of Indian only education since it was sort of all transitioning during this time period that we're talking about. Did you have thoughts then about what the positives and the negatives were?

LUTHER HARBERT MOORE: Well, now, I never thought much about that. I was just concerned that we have community schools. And it happened that the greater majority, about ninety-some percent of the students that lived in our school district were Indian students. I never did have any drawbacks on the Blacks or the whites coming to our school.

I came up in the time when they had white-only signs on the doors in Elm Street in Lumberton and Red Springs on Main Street. I went off to the Navy in 1944, and all of a sudden I came into the white culture. I never did really get fully adapted to it, but I made out with it until '46 when I got out.

MM: And what did you find when you came back here?

LHM: Well, times were pretty tight. Jobs were scarce. A lot of our people were leaving here and going North. World War II in a way was good for the Indian people. We'd been kind of clustered up here together prior to that, and all of a sudden we found out there's different ways of life and different opportunities. Most of the Indian people

that left here did well because of that, especially in the education field. They went on and did well.

MM: So you found greater opportunities when you came back from the war?

LHM: Found out there's another world besides the one we'd been living in.

MM: How long did it take for those signs to come down, those white only signs?

LHM: I don't remember when they came down. I remember seeing them, but I don't remember when they came down. I don't remember that.

MM: Mr. Mangum told me a story about you. He said that, I guess it was when you came back from the war, you went to visit the graveyard here.

LHM: Um-hum. Over at New Prospect.

MM: Oh, was it New Prospect? Tell us about why you were there?

LHM: Well, I had a classmate, we graduated in '43, and he went in service sometime in '44, somewhere about that time. But he was killed in Germany in '45, and they have his picture on his tomb at the cemetery. I'd go there occasionally and visit it, and just think that here was a young man that died at about twenty years of age fighting for a country where he never really had an equal opportunity to acquire an education or anything else.

I remember the first time I went there. I felt pretty bitter about it, but the longer I'd go the less bitterness there'd be.

MM: What did you feel after you left that first time, after you left the cemetery?

LHM: I felt like it was ridiculous that a person lived in a country that treated them less than what they should be to give their life. That's what it amounted to with him when he was twenty years old. He was about a year older than me.



MM: How did that change your outlook on this community, or Robeson County in general maybe?

LHM: Well, I know nobody can help the race they're born into. Nobody can help being white, Indian, or Black, but at least none of us should be punished because of that. And I felt that any time you were treated less than what you should be you were being punished because of your race. And it will never go away. It's better today, but we still have it. It's a little more dressed up than it used to be.

MM: That's true.

LHM: So I kindly watch for it as I go along dealing with people on different issues. I'm very sensitive to it.

MM: I know the events of the 1960s around here especially when it comes to the schools and the changes that were happening would have made anyone, especially you, alert to the ways that Indians were treated in the school system. So tell us a little bit about how the orders for desegregation came down to Prospect, and what the responses were from you as well as other parents, teachers, and church members, people that cared about it and were involved.

LHM: Well, you know, we probably had the highest population of Indian students of any school in Robeson County. I believe I'm correct on that. We still do, but it still served as a community-based school. The majority of the people that live in this immediate community, the Prospect community, are homesteaders, which has been good.

MM: Tell me what you mean by homesteaders?

LHM: Well, what I mean by that are people that's been here a long time and own their own land. They live on it. They don't have to be moving from place to place.

We've been very fortunate that that happened. The land that I'm living on has been in our family 112 years, so we're very fortunate. During the Depression in the '30s there was very little bit of land in this community that was lost. Most people were able to keep it.

MM: So how did that influence the attitudes that people had when they found out that the schools had to be integrated?

LHM: Well, the people—actually our first six acre tract across the street over there, the county would only pay \$125 an acre for the land. That was about 1938 or 39, and the people in the community raised another \$25 an acre so the land owner could get \$900 out of six acres which was a pretty good price back then, but it would be nothing today.

For some reason some people felt like we didn't need to integrate, which I didn't feel that way. A Black child was just as welcome to me come to Prospect as he was to go anywhere else, or white. We have two children that married across racial lines. They both married white, and we think just as much of their children as we do of anybody else's.

MM: Why do you think some of those other people felt that people of other races weren't welcome?

LHM: I don't know. I really don't. I've tried to figure it out, but I've not been able to do that. I don't know. They felt like this was an Indian school. It belonged to the Indian people, especially in the early '70s, which Mr. [James] Jones told you about that. It opened up the door for him when Mr. Dial quit, you know. Mr. Dial just got so frustrated he quit, resigned.

MM: Describe for us from what you remember, was it that somebody let you know that the school had to be integrated because you were on the school committee and then the advisory council. If you could just describe whether it was a conversation, or a meeting that you might have had, or something like that. Who alerted you that this finally had to happen?

LHM: I think the superintendent of schools. I don't remember how it came about, whether it was in just a personal conversation or a special meeting for that, but I think it was the superintendent of the public schools, and I don't remember who was, I guess Mr. Young Allen was the superintendent at that time. I'm not sure.

They closed the lines, the district lines, the school district lines where you had to get special permission from the Board of Education to go out of your district into a school in another district. That was what upset some people because we had parents that had attended Prospect, and maybe their parents ahead of them, and then their children, and they were crossing the line, and the lines became effective a certain date, and they would not enroll them in Prospect School after that date. I don't remember what date it was. It was somewhere around '71. Is that what Mr. Jones said?

MM: That was about right, I think. Yeah. Now I know that Mr. Danford had made a promise to the parents here in Prospect that Black children wouldn't be coming to Prospect. Is that how you remember it?

LHM: I don't know about that. I couldn't say on that. I know that he was a very staunch supporter of the parents, parents' rights. Mr. Dan was a good school man. He was a good school man. I think he just got frustrated with it.

MM: What do you think made him so frustrated?



LHM: I don't know. He hated to see his people hurt, the people that were protesting that. A lot of those people he knew. Some of them were about his age, and there was nothing he could do to relieve them. Nothing anybody could do.

MM: Were you here when the protests were happening?

LHM: Yeah.

MM: Tell us what it was like, just the atmosphere.

LHM: Well, it was just people coming to the school requesting their children to be in whatever grade they were supposed to be in. In fact, I was on the school board when one of our sons came home one day, and he said, "Daddy, they had started putting the children in the classroom, but they couldn't enroll them officially. They could sit in there, but they couldn't have books. They wouldn't issue them books." He told me about it, and we had a meeting shortly after that at the Board of Education office, and I suggested to the Board—it was in litigation at that time. It had gone to court. I said, "Let's take a composition book and do a side role of these children, keep records, go to Oxendine School or whatever school's got the books that they're supposed to have, and get the books, and bring them to the children. Then when they have the trial we'll have to do ever what the court directs us to do." Well, the board voted not to do that. They felt like that would weaken our case in court. That, to me, was putting the system ahead of the children.

But anyway, when it went to court, the judge ordered, I think I'm correct on this, that they remain at Prospect the rest of that year and go to Oxendine the next year. Well, I don't know what effect it had on the children. I don't know whether they'd missed too many days to pass their grades or not, but the report was all over. They took them out

before it went to court. They took them out of the room and put them in the library, these children. To me that was wrong. The children couldn't help it. If their parents were saying, "You're going to Prospect," there was nothing they could do about that. It was kind of rough on the children.

MM: What do you think was such a strong motivation for the parents to keep them from going to Oxendine? What was the reason?

LHM: Well, Oxendine was primarily an Indian school, too, but they just felt like they were being treated wrong to have to take them out of Prospect. This was their home. They felt like they were treated wrong to do that.

MM: How long did all that go on?

LHM: I don't know how long it went on. I think there's a whole school term involved in the sit-in and everything. Just about a school term. I don't remember when they had the trial, but when they had the trial they allowed them to remain at Prospect the rest of that year and go to Oxendine the next year.

MM: Did most of the parents comply with the order to go to Oxendine?

LHM: Yeah. Um-hum. As best I remember they did. We didn't have anybody to resist.

MM: Describe some of the other resistance here in Prospect to what the county board wanted to do to integrate.

LHM: Well, I don't know of any particular thing they wanted to do to integrate. We had two Black teachers, I'm sure, but the best I remember they left, too, and didn't return. I don't remember the circumstances about that.

MM: Was that before Mr. Danford resigned?



LHM: No, that was [after] Mr. Danford left.

MM: Those two Black teachers leaving?

LHM: Um-hum. They closed our school a few days. I don't remember how many days they closed. They wouldn't even let you come to it, nobody.

MM: Who was here closing it?

LHM: They had officers. I don't remember whether it was one or two days. I don't remember.

MM: What led up to it being closed? That seems like an extreme—?

LHM: I don't know. I don't know.

MM: Okay. When you look back on that time, and also through your experience with serving on the school board with other African-Americans and whites, what do you think are the differences between what Indians wanted and what Blacks wanted?

LHM: Well, I don't know what Blacks wanted. Blacks wanted to be mixed, and the Indians, most of them, didn't. They wanted just what they had. See, the problem with the school system, the Indians and the Blacks didn't get as much money in their education system as the whites did.

I still believe had we gotten treated fairly that we'd be better off segregated than we are integrated. I think our school would have been better to have kept its high school. We had more people to go on into higher educational fields when we had our little high school over here than we have out in the community that's gone on since then. Most of our Indian doctors that lived in the Prospect School District graduated from Prospect School. We had some to go to Purnell and do quite well. I supported the move, but that was a mistake when I look at it from hindsight.

MM: Why?

LHM: Well, I just think it got too big over there. Over here everybody knew the principal and the principal knew them. In our community the principal knew their parents. In Mr. Jones' situation he knew a lot of their grandparents, and even their great grandparents. If they had trouble they knew who to go to to resolve it which made a difference. It could be handled more easily than it can over there with Purnell.

MM: Why did you support it at the time?

LHM: Well, I was listening to people that I felt like knew more about education than I did, but then I found out that maybe they didn't know any more. Mr. Jones didn't support it, I don't think.

MM: That's what he said.

LHM: As best I remember he didn't support it.

MM: He said he felt like it wouldn't help Prospect.

LHM: It didn't. I don't think it did, and I have two grandchildren over there now, one in the eleventh and one in the twelfth.

MM: Would you say that when the order for desegregation came down in the early 70s, late 60s or early 70s, was your opinion about it typical of this community, or not typical?

LHM: I didn't have a lot of trouble with it. I knew it would not change us very much. In fact, me and a friend of mine, Mr. Gurney Hunt, we came up with the idea of Prospect Church, you know, when they came out with the competency test.

MM: Tell us what the competency test was.

LHM: That was a test that they had to take to graduate from high school. You're familiar with that, aren't you?

MM: Yeah.

LHM: We formed a group here at our church to help the students that would like for us to help them. Mr. Jones was principal, and he's a member of this church, and we went to him and told him what we were about.

I think there was about ten or twelve of us in the group. He would give us a packet to work with those students, and me and Mr. Gurney Hunt selected three Black students that lived about ten miles from here above Oxendine School. They were here in high school. We'd go up there once a week and work with those children. We got along real well with that. I remember that I got invitations when they graduated. They all made it. It was just little simple stuff. It didn't take a real educated person to figure out. You had to figure percentages and things like that, how you get a percentage of a figure.

After we'd done about a year or two I told Mr. Jones, I said, "I want you to give me somebody that you don't think will pass." He had a little young lady, and he said, "I don't think she'll make it. The teachers don't think she'll make it." I knew the girl's mother and dad, and I'd go there and work with her, but I spent a lot of time trying to show her the importance of a high school education. When Mr. Jones got his reports back he called me. He said, "I'm not supposed to do it, but I've got to show you that that little girl passed."

We had a son that took it that year, too, and he made the highest or second highest in the class on his test. I guess I felt more happy about her passing than I did the grade he



had made, for I knew he could go ahead with that. We're still friends today. I sold them a new lawn mower three or four years ago, her and her husband.

MM: What compelled you to take that kind of initiative with one student?

LHM: I just wanted to see what could be done, but she made it. She made it, and I hope I had just a little share of helping her make it.

MM: I can imagine that you did. She probably is thankful for you now, for helping her make it.

LHM: Pardon?

MM: She's probably thankful for you now.

LHM: You know we decided that we were going to take our students, and the tutors were going to pay the expense, take them on a trip one evening for supper. We went up to the steak house at Laurinburg. Then after we got through eating we gave the students an opportunity to testify, to say what it meant to them, and that was rewarding. In the meantime Mr. Jones had invited Mr. Swett, the superintendent, to go along. We got ready to come out, and he just went ahead and paid for all of our meals. It didn't cost us anything after all.

MM: So that would have been in the late 1970s, I guess?

LHM: I don't remember when that was. It was whenever they came out with the competency test. It was in the 70s, yeah.

MM: Let's go back a few years then to your first years on the school board. Tell us how you came to be on the school board, who appointed you, and how that worked.

LHM: Well, I ran for the school board in 1972. That's when we had five or six school systems in Robeson County. I don't remember. I think it was five or six. That

was before double voting was broken, too, and I did well out in the county and the school districts where the population was Indian people, but a greater majority of the students in the Robeson County district were Indian students. I don't remember the percentages. I think somewhere around sixty percent or better. I knew it was wrong that the city units elect the county board of education. They had the power to do it because of the population, the number of voters that resided in the city school districts.

We decided that we had to break double voting some way, and we organized, and went to court with it in Federal Court in Raleigh, and the judge ruled it was constitutional the way it was to allow the city to elect the Robeson County Board of Education, but the people that lived in the Robeson County Board of Education district couldn't vote on the city school board.

Then we went to Richmond, Virginia. I don't remember. I believe it was the Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals. They ruled in 1975, I think it was, that it was unconstitutional for that to happen. Then I was elected. But I was appointed in 73.

We did a march on the legislative building in Raleigh, and we got there, and they thought they'd have the law out there. They thought a bunch of Indians was coming up there to cause a disturbance. Me, and Brother Bob Mangum, and Brother Harold Woods were on the ( ).

MM: Were on the what? I'm sorry, I couldn't hear you.

LHM: We were just a prayer meeting group more or less.

[TELEPHONE IS RINGING LOUDLY IN THE BACKGROUND.]

MM: I wonder if there's a way we can hear you, but go ahead. So you said sort of a prayer meeting. That's what you told the officials?

LHM: I told somebody I was talking with. There were two Blacks and two Indians appointed. That's when your cousin Sim Oxendine went on. Sim didn't go with us that day, but we had a right good crowd.

MM: Why do you think you were selected to be appointed?

LHM: Because of my involvement. We personally knew the legislators from this district, too. They knew us, and they knew what we were all about. I guess they knew that we were not being treated fairly.

MM: If they knew that, why do you think they didn't change double voting themselves?

LHM: Well, double voting was a means of controlling people's destiny. Like you could control the school board, who went on. The school board has a lot of authority and a lot of power when they start selecting people to run certain schools. That was a pretty important position, or at least we thought it was, and I still think it is today.

Our state has spent millions and millions of dollars on higher education, but when it comes to secondary education they're a little skimpy with it. It's like the bond issue for higher education. We've got what, sixty-two million out of the bond issue for secondary education, and we've got about 25,000 students K through 12, and PSU got fifty-nine million, I believe it was, out of the bond issue where they have less than 5,000 students. So we've got over five times as many students as they have and got just a crumb more money. You know and I know if a person don't get through high school their chances of getting a decent job's kind of skimpy, more so than it was when I went to high school.

MM: Yeah, that's right. It makes me curious if there's something about white control or power that makes that situation the way it is. If there's so many more people



being served by the public secondary school system, why at that time or now is it not funded properly?

LHM: Ask me that again?

MM: I was wondering why you think the secondary school system has never been funded properly since it serves so many more people.

LHM: I don't know why it is on the state level, but I don't think it's done fairly.

MM: What about on a county level?

LHM: I think it's a way of controlling people. That's what I personally think. I think it's a way of controlling people.

MM: Was there a threat, do you think, that someone felt from the Indian community, Indian or Black community in the 60s and the 70s?

LHM: You know, the better education people get the better opportunities are presented to them.

[SOUND OF PEOPLE TALKING LOUDLY IN THE BACKGROUND.]

MM: I'm going to close that door.

[SOUND OF DOOR CLOSING.]

MM: That should be quieter. Okay. Going back then a little bit to the early 70s, you've talked about the students that came here to Prospect even though they weren't supposed to be here, and those conflicts between the administration, and parents, and the school board. Some of the newspapers at the time described those events as riots. I'm wondering what you think about that, what you thought about that at that time. Did you read those reports, and looking back on it what you think about it now?

LHM: I don't think it was a riot. I think it might have had the potential to become one, but I don't think it reached that point.

MM: What would have given it the potential?

LHM: I don't guess the people that were objecting to the Blacks or to what happened, desegregation, maybe were not in leadership roles as much as some people. If they'd of had people in real high leadership roles it would have made a difference.

MM: What was it then that kept it from becoming a riot?

LHM: The fact that these people knew the people. The Indian people that were in leadership roles could kind of keep a cap on it. That's what I personally think. What do you think?

MM: That seems logical because of the personal relationships.

LHM: Right. Right. We church together. We're cousins. We're married into each other, and we're all pretty well as one. You see when the Blacks had their riots they had some of their main leaders in the black denominations. They were pastors and different people. I'm not saying they were wrong to do what they did, but they would burn a place down, or get accused of it.

MM: There were some burnings here, too.

LHM: Yeah, we had some burnings. It was mostly old houses that were not fit for people to live in, and tobacco barns, the out buildings. I don't remember a house where it was occupied, and I don't know who did the burning.

MM: I think sometimes when people look at the situation from an outside perspective, they're not from here and they don't know the community, they look, for example at the Tuscarora movement, and they say, "There's an example of Indians

fighting Indians, or Indians disagreeing.” But what you describe is a little bit different than that. There’s some disagreement, but then there’s things that unify us as well. Would you talk a little bit about the Tuscarora’s movement at that time and some of the things that they were fighting for?

LHM: They were fighting to keep our school an Indian school. You see, the Tuscaroras, I think they might have got accused of some things that they were not guilty of, too, but they were good people. We church with them, and some of the people in the school system had kin to some of the Tuscaroras.

I know I’ve talked with them on different occasions at that time, I talked with them. You couldn’t—I never tried to change their mind. I think they had a right to feel the way they felt as much as I had a right to feel the way I felt.

MM: Sounds like so many of the things they wanted were similar to what some of the Lumbees wanted?

LHM: That’s right.

MM: Keeping it an Indian only school.

LHM: Um-hum.

MM: Why do you think they felt this need to be Tuscarora as opposed to—?

LHM: I don’t know. I don’t know. I knew some of the people though that were Tuscaroras, but I don’t know why they wanted to be.

MM: Was that something that had been part of their identity before this time period?

LHM: Not that I know of.



MM: Some people say that it just sprang up at that time, and other people say no, these people had been Tuscaroras all along, and it just became an issue.

LHM: They might have been Tuscaroras all along as far as I know. I don't know about that, but I know they were pretty supportive of what we believed.

MM: Do you remember anything about the American Indian Movement in Prospect?

LHM: No, I remember when they came to Robeson County, but I don't remember a whole lot about it.

MM: Tell us what you do remember about them coming to Robeson County.

LHM: Well, I don't believe I remember anything other than they were here. I never did go to any of the meetings.

MM: I know, for example, the Save Old Main Movement was happening at this time as well, sort of mixed in with a lot of these other events. The Lumbee Bank was formed at this time. LRDA came about also in the early 70s. Do you have any thoughts about those movements coming together, having sort of lived through it and observed it, what do you think caused all that to happen at the same time?

LHM: I don't know about Old Main. I don't know. I do know I went to a meeting at the college when Dr. Jones was president, and they already had their plans of what they were going to put where Old Main stands. But when I look back on it, it was good that Old Main was saved. The majority of the Indian people registered Democrats, but if you remember it was a Republican governor in Raleigh, and that was the way Old Main was saved.

We had a few of our people that were Republicans and that was a blessing for the college. They built the performing arts center in an ideal location, and if you notice the college is coming out more on Prospect Road than it is on any other road. There's a little coincidence there. The first teacher was from Prospect, and now I think about that when I pass there. There is the administration building facing Prospect Road. The auditorium faces Prospect Road, and a lot of the other buildings are on Prospect Road.

MM: So the connection is growing back towards Prospect. In terms of Democratic and Republican Lumbees, the majority were registered Democrat. How long had that been true.

LHM: As far back as I can remember.

END OF TAPE ONE, SIDE A

BEGINNING OF TAPE ONE, SIDE B

MM: Okay. Go ahead. Your personal reason.

LHM: My personal reason is that most of your elected offices are filled by Democrats in Robeson County. If I was a Republican, I couldn't vote. The primaries, generally the election time, it's not just the nomination time, it's general election time. I can't remember when a local person was elected a Republican official, unless it was a non-partisan election. Do you?

MM: No, no, now that you mention it I can't think of a single local person that was.

LHM: Not unless it's non-partisan. But the Republicans saved Old Main.

MM: So that maybe shifted things a little bit.

LHM: It did.

MM: Do you think local Democrats, white Democrats, thought anything different about the Lumbees after that had happened?

LHM: I don't know. I don't know about that.

MM: I want to talk just a little bit in the last few minutes here about the 1980s. You said that you were originally in favor of merging the high schools, and then you realized that you opposed it. A little bit on after that the merging of the county and the city school systems. How did you feel about that, and what were some of the reactions around here.

LHM: I supported that, too, and I regret supporting it.

[BOTH LAUGH.]

MM: Tell us why you supported it, and why you now regret it.

LHM: Well, again, I thought it was the best thing. Now I think different.

MM: What's happened to make you think differently?

LHM: I just don't see our children going as far as they were. Our baby son was a senior. All of our other four children graduated from Prospect. He was a Senior when he moved to Purnell Swett, West Robeson, which he got one good thing out of. He got up with a girl over there and finally married her, about six years. They have a beautiful family, so we've not lost out there.

I just feel that schools can get too big, especially high schools and elementary schools. Seems just about all the students over here at Prospect knew Mr. Danford and knew Mr. Jones by name, and he knew them, and I think it helped out with the discipline problem, too, when we had our little high school. If they had problems they could handle them better.



I know my brother-in-law had a boy, I had a brother that was teaching over here. He's going to was going to whip him. He was a high school student. The boy said, "I won't take it, Mr. Moore." He said, "That's all right." He said, "You go and get your books, and I'm taking you home to your daddy." He said, the boy said, "Go ahead, Mr. Moore. Go ahead."

MM: He'd rather have a whipping from his teacher.

LHM: That's the kind of relationship we had. We had a son that showed the boys how to open the doors one day that was locked. I don't know what he did to open it, but he showed them he could open it. And Mr. Jones got him up. And Mr. Jones called me. I came out. He didn't have the boy in there, but he told the boy, "I'm going to tell you, but don't you tell nobody what I tell you." So I asked our son, I said, "Son, what did Mr. Jones say to you?" He said, "Mr. Jones told me not to tell," so I never pushed him. I still don't know today what he told him, but that was the only time he had any trouble with him. He just wanted to be a little mischievous, you know, and show them he could open the door.

MM: That's amazing, though, that relationship between the school administrators and the parents.

LHM: It was strong. When I was coming up as a boy in school in the 30s and early 40s, the parents believed what the teachers and the principal said then regardless of what the child said, they believed. And teachers and principals, I think, were looked up to more back in that time than they are today. They were more special. Don't you think so?

MM: I think probably so. Why would you say that was the case?

LHM: I don't know. The preacher, and the teacher, and the school administrator were really looked up to in the community I think more so than what they are today, which was good.

MM: Yeah. It kept the consistency of education for everybody. Was there anything else that I've not asked you or that you feel like you want to say about this overall struggle?

LHM: Not that I know of. I can't think of anything right off. I appreciate the opportunity.

MM: Not as much as I do.

[BOTH LAUGH.]

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE B

END OF INTERVIEW

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