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Interview

with

I. BEVERLY LAKE, JR.

June 27, 1995

by Joseph Mosnier

Indexed by Joseph Mosnier

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

~~Original transcript on deposit at~~
~~The Southern Historical Collection~~
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SOHP Series: The North Carolina Politics ProjectTAPE LOG

Interviewee: I. Beverly Lake, Jr.

Interviewer: Joseph Mosnier

Interview Date: June 27, 1995

Location: Raleigh, NC

Tape No.: 6.27.95-BL.1 (cassette 1 of 2)
 6.27.95-BL.2 (cassette 2 of 2)
 (approximate total length 110 minutes)

Topic: An oral history of I. Beverly Lake, Jr., currently Associate Justice, Supreme Court of North Carolina. Lake Jr. has been an important figure in state political history over the past several decades. Born in Raleigh in 1934, Lake Jr. attended public schools in Wake Forest, NC, and later graduated from Wake Forest College (1955) and the Wake Forest College of Law (1960). In 1960 and again in 1964, his father, I. Beverly Lake Sr., a conservative Democrat, ran unsuccessfully for NC governor as a supporter of racial segregation. Lake Jr. practiced law privately in Raleigh from 1960 until 1969, at which time he joined the staff of the NC Attorney General, becoming Deputy Attorney General in 1974 before returning to private practice in 1976. In October 1979, Lake Jr. quit the Democratic Party for the GOP, and in 1980 ran unsuccessfully against incumbent Democrat governor Jim Hunt. In the early 1980s Lake Jr. was a key figure in the state Republican Party, serving as Finance Chair and as a member of the state GOP's Central Committee and Executive Committee. In 1985, Lake Jr. was appointed as a Special Superior Court Judge, a position he held until 1990. In 1990, Lake Jr. lost a closely contested race for a seat on the state Supreme Court. In February 1992 Lake Jr. was appointed by Republican governor Jim Martin to fill a vacant seat on the Supreme Court, a position he held until January 1993. In November 1994, Lake Jr. handily won election to the state Supreme Court.

Substantively, the interview is organized around three major themes: (1) the evolution of black political activity in North Carolina since the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, (2) the re-emergence of the state Republican Party in these years, and (3) the increasing prominence of certain cultural issues in the state's politics in the same period. The interview proceeds through these matters in roughly chronological fashion, with a focus on Justice Lake's political involvements.

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

TAPE INDEXCounter Index Topic

[Cassette 1 of 1, Side A -- Tape No. 6.27.95-BL.1]

* Restricted - researcher must obtain interviewee's permission to quote from interview

Restriction: Permission from Lake required for quotation.

- 001 [Opening announcement.]
- 006 His plans ca. mid-1960s for his career; he'd given some thought to making a later move into politics.
- 018 His reaction to the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965: they came as "a shock" to the entire governmental system, and there was dismay throughout the bar and concern about the constitutionality of both Acts.
- 035 His early involvement with the state Democratic Party and identified himself as a member of the conservative wing of the Party: "I guess I've always been a conservative." He "was very active in the Democratic Party." He gave the Republican Party very little thought, focusing instead on the conservative-liberal split within the dominant Democratic Party.
- 065 His close ties to Jesse Helms starting in the late 1950s.
- 074 Reasons for his move to the Attorney General's office in 1969.
- 085 He has few recollections of Reginald Hawkins's 1968 run for the governorship.
- 094 His work in the Attorney General's office, and the political forces at work at the time on the work of the office, particularly concerning public utilities. Attorney General Bob Morgan's consideration of taking a shot at the governorship in 1972; he later runs for U.S. Senate in 1974.
- 123 Lake considers running for Attorney General in 1974, in part so he could represent "populist" interests in the struggle on public utility rates. Eight candidates appeared; the liberal wing of the Democratic Party, then calling the shots, chose to back Rufus Edmisten, who became AG in 1974.
- 160 Recollections of the 1972 elections: the surprising success of Republican gubernatorial candidate James Holshouser; Jesse Helms's election to the Senate; etc. Holshouser later built a very strong record as governor; key issues during his tenure included energy issues at the time of the Arab oil embargo and the growth ambitions of NC's public power companies.
- 229 The emergence of the Congressional Club after 1973. Lake was not a member but made some small contributions and some attended Club dinners and events, and believed generally that the Club was doing good work. Tom Ellis has always run the Club; he later brought Carter Wrenn in as a second key Club official. Ellis was very active in the 1960 and 1964 gubernatorial campaigns of Lake's father, I. Beverly Lake Sr.
- 257 Later, the Club changed in an effort to "keep up with the opposition"; worse in Lake's view, was the Club's growing emphasis on money over all other concerns. "The Club began to focus too much on money ... and too little on the quality of the campaigns being run. It got away from the reciprocal closeness to the people that contributed locally to the Club."
- 288 His thoughts on the recent split between Jesse Helms and the Club; he has spoken with Helms and has learned of Helms's displeasure with certain of the Club's fundraising letters and its focus on fundraising rather than its original philosophy.

- 305 On Tom Ellis and Ellis's ambitions for the Club. Early successes prompted growing ambition.
- 326 Reaction to Holshouser's 1972 victory; some initial concern on the part of the Democratic Party, concerns that disappeared after Watergate given Jim Hunt's strong position as Lieutenant Governor and the expectation that he would easily win the governorship in 1976; Holshouser was prevented from seeking a second term by the NC constitution.
- 337 Lake's early contact with Hunt after Lake was elected to the state senate in 1976. Hunt ruled "with an iron hand" while Lt. Governor. Lake recalls opposing a piece of utilities reform regulation introduced by Hunt, who later called Lake over to express his displeasure. They had earlier met in the receiving line at Holshouser's inaugural, at which point Hunt told Lake that Hunt planned to be the next governor. Further details of their later relationship.
- 390 Key issues Lake wanted to address during his two terms in the state senate. He wanted utility reform legislation; thought the public was being "ripped off." He also had concerns about the public schools, including curriculum, lax student discipline, and excessive spending on school physical plant; and crime.
- 420 Insights into how the NC legislature did its work. While in the Attorney General's office, Lake had come to the view that most persons in the legislature were "party boys" who were not terribly talented. Later, as a member of the senate, he came to see that the frequent social functions actually served as venues for doing much of the people's business. He still held the view that many legislators were not very serious, however.
- 455 When Lake arrived in the senate, given his earlier role in the Attorney General's office, he was given leadership roles, which he welcomed. He was first made Chair of the senate's Public Utilities and Energy Committee; during his second term he was also made Chair of the Judiciary Committee. He quickly found the people he could work with and got some good things done.
- 470 Lake has few recollections of the 1976 Lieutenant Governor's race between Jimmy Green and Howard Lee. Lake's fondness for Howard Lee.
- 504 Reason's for Lake's October 1979 abandonment of the Democratic Party and affiliation with the GOP.
- 560 Details of the GOP's courtship of Lake. Description of the arguments made by the GOP to persuade Lake to switch parties.
- 640 One factor in the GOP's desire to convince Lake to crossover was its desire to have a candidate to run against the incumbent Democratic governor Jim Hunt.
- 656 One factor encouraging Lake to switch and run for governor was the prospect for strong backing by the Congressional Club. The late 1970s were the "glory days" of the Club, as proven by the triumph of Club-supported candidate Ronald Reagan in the GOP presidential primary in NC in 1976 over Gerald Ford. But the Club clearly failed in its efforts to raise money in-state for Lake in his run against an incumbent governor; in the end, Lake raised some \$343,000, while Hunt raised more than \$7 million.

692 [End of Side A.]

[Cassette 1 of 1, Side B -- Tape No. 6.27.95-BL.1]

- 001 Further details about his 1980 campaign and his relationship to the Congressional Club. Suggests that his confidence in the Club was misplaced, since he does not believe he got the help he might have from the Club.
- 017 Lake declines to say a lot about the failure of the Club to support his campaign as they might have; he does say that the Club was supporting many candidates, that the campaign was not as focused as it might have been, and that the financial support he expected did not materialize. Without Helms's active support, Lake's efforts to raise money by phone, as the Club directed, generally did not prove very fruitful; Lake would have preferred to focus instead on getting his county organizations set up, meeting the press, and other more traditional campaigning techniques.
- 046 Lake's ties to the Reagan administration. He was considered a possible candidate for Deputy Secretary in both the Departments of Agriculture and Energy; he interviewed in D.C. for both positions, but was not attracted by what he learned about the positions.
- 060 Lake believes that time has proven the merits of the arguments he advanced in his campaign. Describes his commitment to principle over partisan politics.
- 085 Views on the shifts in the state's economic mix. His conviction that environmental protections must be improved.
- 117 Race was not a factor in his 1980 campaign, despite the earlier arguments of his father. Lake Jr. considered the constitutional issues resolved by that point and did not focus on them in his campaign. Lake Jr. considers it "understandable" that a black person, having read about Lake Sr.'s campaigns and never having met either of the Lakes personally, might not feel comfortable supporting a Lake as a candidate.
- 137 In early 1980s, his work as a state GOP official and efforts to reestablish his law practice. Had some difficulty raising money for the Party, but did set up some programs involving donor visits to the White House.
- 165 In early 1980s Lake saw some "disturbing apathy" but was generally encouraged about Republican prospects, though more at the national level than in NC. There were some worries about Jim Hunt's anticipated challenge to Jesse Helms in 1984.
- 189 The state GOP was focused on the upcoming 1984 U.S. Senate and gubernatorial campaigns, and was generally optimistic.
- 207 Lake's connections to the the 1984 Jim Martin campaign and to the 1984 Reagan-Bush campaign.

- 214 How Jim Martin emerged as the GOP gubernatorial candidate for 1984. Lake himself was "not really burning to run again. I need to recoup, in many ways." Tax reform was the centerpiece of the Martin campaign; Lake and others found it necessary to help Martin learn the ropes of state government, since Martin's prior political experience had been as a Mecklenburg County commissioner and as a member of Congress.
- 232 Relationship in the early 1980s between the state GOP and the Congressional Club was marked by tensions. There had been an earlier party-Club scrap in 1976, with the party supporting Ford and the Club supporting Reagan. "It was a very bitter fight...." During Lake's 1980 campaign these tensions were just below the surface, and by the early 1980s old wounds had still not healed, while new wounds were being incurred well into the 1980s.
- 262 The state Democratic Party in the early 1980s was fractured; the line of demarcation was drawn between two strong personalities.
- 290 His reflections on the significance of the 1984 Hunt-Helms race. Helms has always been driven by ideology and philosophy, perhaps more so than any other politician on the scene. The amount of money raised and spent was "shocking" and points to the power of electronic media in determining out future political leaders.
- 320 Congressional redistricting in NC in 1982. Lake does not favor redistricting to create majority-minority districts. "Gerrymandering has been with us for a long time. That doesn't make it right." Majority-minority districting "is forced, not natural," and undermines a "natural" sense of community and a "natural" path of human development. Too much militancy has created a backlash and spawned resentment.
- 436 Why the ERA failed in NC. "You just don't want [to amend the Constitution] willy-nilly." "We may have a few too many amendments already."
- 460 On the emergence of women in NC politics. "I think the future speaks very well for women who desire to make a career [in any field they might choose]."
- 492 Ramifications of GOP gains in the NC House in 1988.
- 513 The 1989 Mavretic coup to gain the House Speakership recalls for Lake a similar effort he made in 1985 that came within four or five votes of ousting Liston Ramsey.
- 537 Reflections on the 1994 election outcome. Lake feels much satisfaction, not only for the Party but also for the sake of "good government." The present legislature works better on a bipartisan basis than any he can remember.
- 562 Recollections on the 1990 Helms-Gantt U.S. Senate race, which could have gone either way as late as 20 days before the election, when Helms finally surged ahead.
- 610 Lake's 1990 unsuccessful campaign for a seat on the NC Supreme Court. The "Helms-Gantt race cost me an election in 1990." Explanation of the very close outcome and the controversy surrounding the extension of polling hours in certain heavily Democratic precincts.

691 [End of Side B.]

Counter Index Topic

[Cassette 2 of 2, Side A -- Tape No. 6.27.95-BL.2]

- 001 [Opening announcement.]
- 005 Further description of the controversy surrounding the November 1990 election. Lake's subsequent legal challenge to the outcome became moot when Lake was appointed to the NC Supreme Court in 1992.
- 046 Why social-cultural issues resonate with voters: "because of perceived injustice." Americans "get very emotionally involved with these issues" because they perceive elemental questions of justice to be at issue. American culture is uniquely concerned with basic questions of justice.
- 090 Lake's summary of some of the key issues that have been and continue to be crucial to NC, including ERA and education issues (he would prefer to "cut out all the fluff... and get right down to the real basics" of education).
- 127 Lake believes that NC's current public education system is "pretty sad."
- 130 Lake believes that current Democratic Governor Jim Hunt's recent State of the State Address sounded remarkably like Lake's own standard stump speech in the 1980 gubernatorial campaign.
- 142 Lake sees the GOP's rise as a trend that will continue.
- 165 Key political issues in NC's future will include education ("we can do a whole lot better with a whole lot less money") and the environment ("we haven't made much progress").
- 220 "We've made great progress" on racial issues "Particularly in the South," different races "basically like each other, ...and I sometimes think that if the outside agitators would leave us alone we'd get along fine." Jurisprudence has reached the point of offering all persons equal opportunity, and there is a popular consensus for merit-based advancement. Affirmative action programs, labor union advocacy, civil rights groups' advocacy -- these efforts are now passe.
- 295 [End of interview. Side B of Cassette 2 is blank.]