

SOHP Series: Listening for a Change
Davidson College Interviews - Lincoln County

TRANSCRIPT - STEVE CHERRY

Interviewee: Steve Cherry

Interviewer: Mark Jones

Date: 19 February 1999

Location: Denver, N.C.

Tape No.: (cassette 1 of 1)
(90 minutes)

Notes: Mr. Cherry is a retired ex-coach and principal in the Lincoln County, North Carolina school system. He served as the boys varsity basketball coach at East Lincoln High School from its inception in 1967 until 1974. He also coached football during this period. Afterwards he went into administration- first as principal at East Lincoln Junior High School and then as principal at East Lincoln High School. He retired in 1996.

East Lincoln High School is located in Denver, North Carolina at the eastern end of Lincoln County. The school opened in 1967-1968 after the federal government mandated that the "Freedom of Choice" plan which had existed in the county during 1966 was insufficient in achieving integration. Eastern Lincoln county is primarily a rural area.

The interview took place at Mr. Cherry's house in Denver. Upon my arrival, Mr. Cherry was very cordial and invited me inside. His friendliness eased some of my nervousness and made me feel more at ease. He was very honest and seemed very willing to share.

TRANSCRIPT

[Cassette 1 of 1, Side A]

MARK JONES: Alright, this is an interview with Mr. Steven Cherry, February 19, 1999, Denver, North Carolina - and Mr. Cherry if you could introduce yourself so we can test the tape.

STEVE CHERRY: I am a retired principal, junior high school and high school and ex coach, twenty-nine years in the Lincoln County school system in North Carolina.

MJ: Alright, Mr. Cherry, my first question is: Where were your parents from? You just mentioned that you grew up here-

SC: I grew up. . . I'm living in my grandfather's old home place. I grew up here in Lincoln County, was born in Mooresville, was educated at Western Carolina, University of North Carolina at Charlotte and then Appalachian, and I also did doctoral work at Nova(sp?) University.

MJ: What did your parents do?

SC: Both my parents were employed in the textile industry in Mooresville, in the Cascade Mills in Mooresville. . . Burlington Mills.

MJ: Do you have any brothers or sisters?

SC: I have one sister, younger sister, four years younger than I.

MJ: Can you describe your schooling growing up: class size and racial makeup and etc. I imagine that there were separate schools for whites and blacks then.

SC: There were separate schools. I graduated from Rock Springs High School in 1960, here in Denver. There were thirty-nine people in my graduating class. Of those thirty nine, the vast majority of them had gone through school, one through twelve, together. I was involved in athletics there and didn't really do a whole lot of studying in high school. I was more involved with athletics and didn't really study a lot.

MJ: What sports did you play?

SC: Football, basketball and baseball. They was the only three sports Rock Springs offered. (Laugh)

MJ: Now did they have sports for girls back then or-

SC: They had a very active girls basketball program and a girls softball program.

MJ: And cheerleading or. . .

SC: They had cheerleading, yes. But that was the only girls activities, athletics.

MJ: And how about the black school?

SC: The black schools - all of the blacks in the county were taken to one high school, Newbold High School in Lincolnton. They were bussed there.

MJ: And, sorry I am not familiar with the geography of the county, we are in East Lincoln, right?

SC: We're in the eastern end. Lincolnton is in the middle and then the western end is West Lincoln High School.

MJ: And where was Rock Springs?

SC: Rock Springs was in Denver about five miles from here and it's on the Eastern end.

MJ: Is it still . . .

SC: Rock Springs was consolidated and is now East Lincoln High School. . . where I was principal

MJ: Okay, so when you were in school there was Rock Springs in the east and Newburn . . .

SC: Newbold in Lincolnton and Lincolnton High School, for the white kids in Lincolnton and West Lincoln - well, there were Union and Northbrook, two high schools in the western end of the county, two smaller high schools.

MJ: And were they white schools.

SC: They were white schools.

MJ: Now did all of the black students go . . .

SC: All of the black students went to Newbold.

MJ: And how big were Rock Springs and Union?

SC: I would say at that time Lincolnton High School was the largest school in the county. Rock Springs and Union and Northbrook were all Class A high schools in athletics so they were all about the same size. Like I say, I had thirty nine people in my graduating class. There were thirty nine seniors. Newbold was probably a little bit larger than Rock Springs. But really there were not that many blacks that were in this county at that time.

MJ: And as far as athletic competition, am I correct in assuming that the Rock Springs teams played only white. . .

SC: We played only white teams. Blacks schools played black schools. The only contact that I had with blacks at all was here on my grandfather's farm and there were three or four black teenagers that were teenagers at the same time as I was a teenager. When we were smaller kids we played together and we were teenagers we would play baseball together, that kind of stuff but that's the only .

..

MJ: Just informally or . . .

SC: Informally. Informally- in the back yard.

MJ: And did they live here?

SC: The lived right in - well, two of them lived right beside me. One of them was a sharecropper's son that lived on my grandfather's place and the other, the black woman owned property that joined our property and her grandson. That was the two boys that I'm thinking of.

MJ: And were you close friends with these people?

SC: No. We just played ball together and worked together in the fields, but if I were going out, I would go out with white kids and they would go out with black kids. . . Sort of thrown together of circumstance. There really . . . at that

point in time on this entire road – this road went to Cornelius. Across Lake Norman, before Lake Norman was there, across the Catawba River and ended up in Cornelius. And from the river all the way to Highway 16 there were only three white teenagers that lived there.

MJ: As compared to how many . . .

SC: Oh, Lord. I've got people that live within a half a mile of me now that I've never seen before.

MJ: How about, how many black students.

SC: There were probably – in that same stretch there were probably – I'm talking in terms of the boys because I knew them better, there were probably four.

MJ: And when you were playing . . . were there any conflicts, I mean other than – obviously when you're playing sports you get into arguments and things – anything based on race?

SC: No, no. There was – as far as any conflicts, there never was any because we were. . . Number one we were usually so tired we didn't want to fight because we'd been working in the fields. My grandfather had a farm and I helped him and he hired the boys and their mothers and fathers a lot of times to help in the fields. Like I say, you might throw a dirt clod at one another but it was more picking and playing than it was mad. They just as liable to throw the first dirt clod as me.

MJ: This is kind of a difficult question to ask, so I don't know if you want to answer it but I hear a lot today about how blacks are more equipped or whatever for certain sports like football, basketball . . . Now was that an issue back then?

SC: No, we were kids playing. We were kids throwing rocks and hitting them with tomato stakes and you know, we weren't worried about who was a good athlete. We were just – that was just something to fill the spare time till you went back to the fields.

MJ: So you graduated from – you were educated at Western Carolina and UNCC.

SC: Right.

MJ: And Appalachian.

SC: Right.

MJ: Is that Appalachian State?

SC: Appalachian State.

MJ: When did you decide to go into education?

SC: I decided to go into education my junior year in high school. Wasn't so much to go into education as it was to coach. That was the thing that – athletics was what put me into the education field.

MJ: And were you thinking of any particular sport?

SC: Basketball.

MJ: Now, you said that you coached for a few years in Charlotte-Meck. Was that before you came here?

SC: That was before I came here. I graduated from Western Carolina in 1964 and did my student teaching at Spaugh Junior High School in Charlotte. And it was still segregated at that time. I then took a job, my first teaching job was at Spaugh and then I transferred to Quail Hollow Junior High School. And coached there for two years. Had Bobby Jones and Skeet Harris - played linebacker at Duke - and Walter Davis were all athletes of mine that I coached.

MJ: Were these white athletes?

SC: Bobby Jones was white and Skeet Harris was white. Walt Davis who played Carolina, he was black. Now he came the last year that I was there.

MJ: Was that the first year of integration?

SC: That was the first year of integration. I coached the first integrated basketball game in Charlotte-Mecklenberg school system. The junior high, the junior high school and the junior high season started one day before the high school season and everybody was on pins and needles. There were fifteen, counting the trainer and my wife and myself and twelve ball players, there were fifteen white people that I took to Northwest Junior High School. That's right adjacent to Johnson C. Smith University. And we were the only white people in the building. It was sort of. . . very intimidating. It was funny when you think about it now. They wanted to make a very good impression and wanted to keep everything on even terms and I'm not sure whether you know what Hiltone (sp?) is. Hiltone is the floor covering- it's almost like a wax, a polish that you put on the gym floors to keep it shiny and take the dust off. They had put so much Hiltone on the floor that when we came out to warm up, that you couldn't stand up. And everybody was slippin' and slidin' and fallin' down and we had to get the people to come down out of the stands and walk back and forth across the floor with the grit on their feet to get the Hiltone up so as we could play the basketball game.

MJ: Wow.

SC: It was a weird experience. I guess you would say. In the gym with the noise we had not been used to that type cheering. The stands . . .

MJ: What do you mean when you say that? Like loud, or . . .

SC: I had - well, not actually, loud but more of a chanting type. Everybody involved kind of , kind of cheering as opposed to the white cheerleaders going out and saying a cheer and then everybody calming down and maybe yelling occasionally at a referee or something of that nature. This was almost constant throughout the game, the singing and chanting and - it was very intimidating. Had I not had some very good ballplayers we probably would have lost the ballgame. That was. . . that was an experience.

MJ: Now do you remember before the game, in preparation, what you told the team and what their reaction was?

SC: Their reaction- they were ninth graders and really didn't have a reaction other than believing what I told them. And I just told them that we were going to be on our best behavior and that we were going to have to play hard and that we were going into a strange situation - a situation that none of us had ever been

in before and if anything happened on the floor they were to bite their tongue, keep their mouth shut and be on their best manners. Otherwise they'd be getting _____. (Laugh) And, we had no problems. It was a good experience, but, like I say, it was a test. Most of these kids we're talking about coming out of South Charlotte. From the Myers Park south.

MJ: Very white area?

SC: Very upper crust white kids. And going into that environment, it was a totally new experience for them. I won't call the player's name because he ended up and became a very famous player but after the ballgame when we got back, I asked him how it was playing against their center. He was about 6'4" at the time and their center was about 6'4" at the time at Northwest. He said, "I did okay but I couldn't stand to get close to him. When you touch him, his head felt like a brillo pad." (Laugh) And that was his first experience with a black athlete. He'd never been anywhere around a black athlete before.

MJ: Do you think that was true for most of the kids on your team . . .

SC: For all of the kids on my team. Because . . .

MJ: There wasn't any of the informal . . .

SC: No, they were from South Charlotte, South Park, Park Road area. And a lot of them had never come in contact with any blacks at all.

MJ: And now, you mentioned previously that the cheering was different. Did you find it to be more- like a tougher environment to play in because of personal assaults or _____?

SC: No, it was just a different type. They weren't basing it toward us. They were pulling for their team. But we had just not been used to that kind of cheering from the very opening gun to the final buzzer. A lot of times, you know, even during timeouts when nothing was going on on the floor they were still- it was almost like a chanting. . . a singing. . . more like a party to them than it was like a ballgame to what we were used to. . . It was. . . it was strange.

MJ: And now do you remember whether the referees in that game were white or black or did they have one of each?

SC: I don't remember. I don't really remember. I've not thought about that. I don't remember.

MJ: So you don't know whether the outcome of the game could have been affected by the environment.

SC: I think with the ballclub that I had that year on a neutral floor, that had not been slicked down and was not slick - a lot of times you'd come to a stop and you might slide three feet. And I do remember that the referees didn't call a lot of traveling and that kind of stuff in this ballgame. But, with the ballclub that I had, I think we'd have beat them thirty points under good conditions. Because I had a tremendous ballclub. Four of the five players that I had on that ninth grade team went on the play in college and to of them played in the pros.

MJ: Wow. Would you be willing to give any names. . .

SC: Bobby Jones and Walt Davis were two of them.

MJ: Now, do you keep up with these players?

SC: I keep up with up Bobby. I have not talked to Walt in quite some time. But I keep up with Bobby.

MJ: Now this game you're talking about here was an all-white team playing against an all black team. What year was that?

SC: 1965-66.

MJ: Was this. . . You mentioned that the first integrated game was - each team was all one race. When did the teams become integrated themselves?

SC: The following year. Sterling, which was an elementary school in Pineville, merged with Quail Hollow and I had the first black athlete. That was the year Walt Davis - Walt was not on this team. I was mistaken. Walt came a year later. Walt Davis came on the team in 1966-67. He and a little boy by the name of Bobby White, believe it or not, were the first two black players that I ever had. They came from Sterling, which was a black school in Pineville.

MJ: I'm sorry, I'm getting confused. You were still at Spaugh?

SC: No, I was still at Quail Hollow. See I spent one year at Spaugh - did my student teaching and I had JV basketball there. And then the principal left and went to Quail Hollow and took me with him to coach the ninth grade _____. I spent two years at Quail Hollow.

MJ: The first year, 1965-66, was when you coached in the first integrated game.

SC: Right, right.

MJ: And then the next year was when . . .

SC: Right. That's the first black players that I ever coached.

MJ: I guess that the school board decided previous to 1966 that Quail Hollow was going to be integrated.

SC: Well, the entire system. That's when busing started. That's when busing in Charlotte started. I can't remember the judge. . . Snepp, I believe, came down with the busing ruling. [Cherry is referring to state court judge Frank Snepp, although it was federal court James McMillan who issued the busing order.] And started busing kids all over Charlotte, integrating all of the schools. And the busing continued up until just recently. As a matter of fact it's still in the news today.

MJ: Yes, we've been looking at that . . .

SC: It's still in the news today.

MJ: How many black students did you have at Quail Hollow?

SC: The first year we had black students there, we had five black students in the entire school. And that school was around 1400 kids.

MJ: And, within the school, was there a lot of tension?

SC: Not there. Now, when I came up to the high school, here in Lincoln County, there was. See after I left Quail Hollow, I came back to East Lincoln High School and became head coach there, basketball and assistant for football.

MJ: Varsity basketball?

SC: Yeah. That's when Newbold . . . That's when Lincoln County desegregated and Newbold . . . They took Rock Springs and Newbold and made East Lincoln High School.

MJ: And what year was that?

SC: That was in 1967. '67-'68. The students that came in from Newbold, there were a lot of older students that were still in high school at Newbold. They looked - compared to some of the white kids that we had there, they looked like old men. They looked like they ought to be 35 years old - had beards and mustaches and were big physically and muscular. . . They made a definite impact on the athletic program at East Lincoln.

MJ: Was the athletic program integrated immediately?

SC: Yes.

MJ: I remember, I think I'm right about this and you can tell me more - the Shrine Bowl wasn't integrated for a little while after the rest of the schools were integrated. Now, within East Lincoln High and Quail Hollow you said that ____ black groups integrated. Were they encouraged to play?

SC: Oh yeah. The athletic teams at East Lincoln High School kept - well, I started to say kept. Let's say it helped the desegregation process. . . tremendously. Had students come in and not been involved in athletics, I don't think that desegregation would have been nearly as smooth as it ran in Lincoln County. Because as I said before, they made a tremendous impact on our football and our basketball programs.

MJ: Just on their athletic abilities?

SC: Athletic abilities. It gave the student body a focal point. Something to cheer for and to get to know people and to see them as an athlete rather than just having somebody thrown together and not having anything in common. It gave them some common ground.

MJ: Now you mentioned, previously, that there wasn't such a big thing at Quail Hollow but at East Lincoln there was . . .

SC: After about the third or fourth year. The first year everybody was very nervous and. . . The teachers, students, everybody was really nervous because no one knew what to expect. I guess I was one of the few people that had been involved with black students before the high school opened.

MJ: So this is the first year?

SC: This is the very first year of East Lincoln High School. And it was. . . it was. . . it was. . . a very uneasy situation but there was not a whole lot of tension. When the tension developed was three or four or five years after that, after everybody had been together for awhile. And the tension that really arose at East Lincoln High School came from what we call the T&I boys, which are your good ol' boys, the rednecks, and the carpentry classes and the brick masonry classes and some of the more outspoken, militant, blacks classes. And there was a lot of tension between those two groups, particularly.

MJ: How did that manifest itself. Like, fights . . .

SC: Fights, threats, people walking the halls. No one knowing what to expect. Staring at each other: one group standing on one side of the hall staring, another group standing in the cafeteria staring. You were expecting something to break out constantly. By that time I was assistant principal there and I was right in the middle of all of it, okay. Even though I was still coaching, I still had to be the disciplinarian and be between the groups and that was the unsettled time.

MJ: Do you remember any specific incidents where. . .

SC: Well we had a boy come in one morning in a pickup truck with a rebel flag flying on the back. And we had some of the more outspoken, bigger, blacks that were not involved in athletics - the athletes usually were not involved in these kinds of things because the coaches kept pretty close rein on the athletes. But these were people that were not athletes but they were still outspoken, more militant types. And they went to take the flag off the truck and we had a donnybrook in the parking lot. The law had to separate everybody. Eight or ten people were arrested and hauled off to jail and suspended from school for ten days. Parents were very concerned about safety factors and those kinds of things. That was one thing that comes to mind immediately. There were two or three others; things that happened over the course of those - I would say the middle years because it wasn't at the start. It was after everybody had been together five or six years and there was some animosity built up. And hard feelings.

MJ: And do you think- Why do you think it was that it took four or five years?

SC: I've thought about it a lot. I think a lot of it had to do. . . this was. . . I had the family- I'm sure that you've seen the video tape. (Phone rings. Tape cut off)

SC: What was I saying, now?

MJ: Talking about why it took four or five years.

SC: I'm sure you've seen the video tape of the guy in Greensboro, when the Klu Klux Klan marched, of the guy standing over the man pulling the trigger, shooting him. . . on tape. I had that family in my school. I had his son in the school. I had three or four very prominent Klu Klux Klan members in that school- parents, in the school. A lot of it was directed at those kids because they were in the T&I department. [Cherry is referring to the events of --- when . . .]

MJ: What does T&I mean?

SC: Trade and Industry- carpentry and brick masonry. They were a group of kids who came to school to learn a trade. They stayed together. They had a three-hour block of classes in the morning and they stayed together all day long and most of them were physically big and . . .

MJ: Were these white kids?

SC: White kids. They were physically big and most of them were pretty physical anyway. Had grown up on the farm. Had grown up around construction and were not afraid to fight and everybody knew that. Some of the blacks that moved in came from Baltimore and D.C. and that area and came down and they were more militant, more outspoken, than some of the blacks that were native to

here. And, there was just a clash. I'm not really sure sometimes that it was as much black and white as it was a clash between people. But, it happened and there never – the thing that always bothered me about the integration situation, you and I, if I were black and you were white, you and I couldn't have a disagreement and you and I couldn't get in a fight. There'd always be fifteen on each side. You know. I'd get my buddies and you'd get your buddies and then we'd all go stand at each other and point fingers in the hall. And, you know, two people couldn't have a disagreement – have a fight. There was always a crowd on each side. And that was what was the scary part of it. Because you were always dealing with something that could blow up, even though it didn't a lot of times but it could have. And if it had, it would have been bad.

MJ: Now you mentioned as assistant principal you were the disciplinarian and you had to basically stand the line between these groups. Now, did you ever feel physically threatened yourself?

SC: I stood between – at a football game, I stood between a man that I knew that was a big Klan – president of the Klan in Lincoln County. I knew that he had a pistol in his boot. I knew that and I stood belly to belly with him and another man directly behind me with a baseball bat in his hands telling me that he was going to kill him and the other guy said 'let me at him' and all I'm saying is 'you don't want to cause trouble here where there is four thousand people here at this football game and you don't want to start anything here' and I'm standing between 'em.

MJ: Wow.

SC: If that can be called physically threatening, I felt physically threatened.
(Laugh)

MJ: Do you know what started that encounter?

SC: Their sons had words that day at school.

MJ: About? Did . . .

SC: One of each of them were in the groups that I talked about earlier. One of them was in the T&I boys and the other one was one of the militant blacks and they had been mouthing back and forth all week. And everything's going to happen at the crowd at the football game on Friday night. 'I'll get you at the game,' you know. Little less supervision there and more free space and every time anything was gonna always happen at the game.

MJ: You mentioned earlier that most of the time the athletes . . .

[End Tape 1, Side A, begin Tape 1, Side B]

MJ: I started to ask before- you mentioned previously that the athletes weren't normally involved in these clashes. Why do you see that? Do you think that simply because through athletics – football, basketball, they interacted . . . like, blacks were interacting with whites, whites were interacting with blacks and they had gotten beyond these racial issues?

SC: I can only speak for East Lincoln High School. First of all, I think that the athletes had a respect for each other. They were teammates. Secondly, at East Lincoln High School, I think the athletes, both black and white, knew that 'If I get in trouble, he's going take my uniform.'

MJ: Meaning you.

SC: Right. And, they had to bring their report cards to me at every grading period. I checked with their teachers between report periods. We have had study hall before practice - that kind of thing. It wasn't that I was a tyrant. It was that I had a real good ball club and I didn't want to lose anybody. And I didn't want a kid to mess himself up. And everyday - there was not a week went by that a lot of times I did not call one of my players into the office and say, 'Joe, Jonny's getting ready to get himself into trouble down the hall. He's been running his mouth some more and you better get down there and straighten it out. You don't want no trouble. You don't want nobody talking about East Lincoln High School.' The first thing you know, thirty minutes later, Jonny's mouth was shut.

MJ: So you think that the players had a respect for the program and the team?

SC: Right. Yeah.

MJ: _____. As far as generally, as far the community was concerned, were there _____ was there a lot of concern?

SC: I think a lot of people were concerned about it initially. Especially the white people. I knew more about them at that time than I knew about the blacks. I think there was a lot of concern, but I don't think there was as much concern after the first couple of years as there might be within the last few years. Right before I retired, there was a lot of - I got called a lot of names by both sides. I was principal at that time. And all of the responsibility fell on my shoulders.

MJ: And what year was this?

SC: This was- I was principal at East Lincoln from 1982-1996. Fourteen years. And, the longer I stayed in the administrative end of the school system, the more pressure that I felt, especially from the blacks - the NAACP and that kind of thing. The government - I have forgotten the name of the report we had to fill out. Anyway it was a suspension report. And, if I had too many blacks on there percentage wise, they would jump me. The county office would jump me and the NAACP stayed on me. As a matter of fact, I told the president of the NAACP in Lincoln County one time - he came in and said, 'You're prejudiced.' I said, 'Yes, I sure am.' It sort of stopped him cold and I let him sit there for about fifteen or twenty seconds and I finally told him, 'I'm prejudiced against trouble.' And I said, 'I don't care if trouble is polka-dotted, it's out the front door.' That sort of took a little bit of steam out of his sails. And then, on the other side of the picture, if I let a black get by with something and not suspend him then there was this faction of the white population that was always callin' me the 'N' word - the nigger lover. You know, you're sitting in a position where it's almost a no win position. And the only thing you can do, or the only thing that I tried to do

in that situation was do what I felt was right for the kids and let the chips fall where they may. If you were in trouble, you were in trouble. I don't care what color you were. That's sort of the way I looked at it. That's the way I operated at East Lincoln High School until I left.

MJ: And were you still coaching at this time?

SC: No. No, my last year coaching was 1984. No 1982, I'm sorry. . . 1972. . . 1974. And I'll get it right in a minute because I went to junior high school. 1974 was my last year coaching.

MJ: So you went from Spaugh to Quail Hollow to-

SC: East Lincoln High School to East Lincoln Junior High School.

MJ: And were you coaching there?

SC: I was principal there and then came back to East Lincoln High School as principal.

MJ: You mentioned that - I'm sorry that I'm jumping back and forth.

SC: It's alright.

MJ: Four or five years down the road there were more tensions. Was this at all reflected at the sporting events? Like, in terms of people cheering for players on the floor?

SC: No, that didn't really. . . The thing that I did notice is that it seemed that the more blacks you had on a high school team, the less white parents came to watch. Now whether that was because their kids were not involved and they just came to watch their kids, that I don't know. I do know that a lot of the black parents were not involved in the school system. They didn't come to the games, you couldn't get in touch with them over discipline issues, that kind of thing. Whether that's a cultural kind of thing, or socioeconomic, or what, I don't know. But, I know that the attendance fell off. When your won-lost record falls, your attendance falls automatically, but the makeup of the crowd changed.

MJ: And did it become any less or more vocal? You mentioned the different cheering styles.

SC: Not really. No, no. I know that we always very careful to have black cheerleaders - a certain percentage of black cheerleaders and that kind of thing. As far as cheering, I don't think that changed as long as the team was strong and. . . winning. That seemed to be more important than who was out there. You see, it was the won-lost record.

MJ: Are you speaking of the people in the stands?

SC: Talking about the student body.

MJ: And how about when you went into other towns where integration hadn't come as quickly or completely? Was there more of a ____-

SC: I had players when I was still coaching that the opposing teams tried to get thrown out of the game. They called them everything but holy and pinched them and pulled their jerseys . . .

MJ: Black players?

SC: Yeah. I had a black center one time that came to the bench crying, begging me to let him hit their center. Said, 'He's called me everything, he's talked about my mama, he's done everything in this world to me.' and said, 'I know I can't swing and hit him because you'll kill me. Just please let me hit him one time.' Cried tears runnin' down out of his eyes. And I just patted him on the back and said, 'No, Joe, you don't need to do that.' I said, 'We need you in this ballgame and we need you against him.' I said, 'He's not going to hurt you with words. You just keep playing. The best way you can hurt him is to get 35 and every ball that goes on the boards is yours.' And he played his heart out.

MJ: And that was at East Lincoln?

SC: That was at East Lincoln.

MJ: Do you remember what year that was?

SC: That was. . . toward the end of my coaching career. That was probably about '70.

MJ: Do you know what school you were playing?

SC: No, I don't remember. I don't remember which school but I. . . Yeah I do, too. It was _____ High School. I just remembered. And they were all white. They didn't have a black on the squad.

MJ: Do you know if they had any blacks at the school?

SC: I don't know, but I know that they didn't have a black playing basketball.

MJ: Now, you mentioned with regard to cheerleading that the school made an effort to have a certain percentage of blacks on the squad. Did you have that in mind when making cuts for the basketball team?

SC: No. No, we did not do that in basketball, and we did not do that in football. But, for the cheerleading, we felt that for our black athletes. . . and at the time the white student body outnumbered the black student body so greatly in numbers that we felt that the black athletes needed some black cheerleader support. So, we said that there had to be at least one black cheerleader and, you know, we never had to place a black cheerleader on the squad. They were always selected on their own merit, while I was there. So that was always. . .

MJ: What was the racial makeup of the basketball team and football?

SC: Football was probably. . . I would guess 60 white, 40 black. Basketball started out probably 70-30 white to black and has since gone to maybe 50-50 and maybe, some years 60 black, 40 white, especially basketball.

MJ: And do you ever remember any. . . inner team problems?

SC: Nothing racial. No, we had some problems - somebody hit somebody with an elbow in practice and. . . You always fought among yourselves, but when it came time to play the other team, you were always together.

MJ: And, in the situation like the one in the story, do you think the white players on your team would generally step forward?

SC: Oh yeah. They would've fought for Joe. Because he was a member of their team, he was one of them. Even though you'd have scraps and so forth during practice time among yourselves, when you went into a hostile environment, you

were one. And I think that sort of helped. You've got to have a little competition in practice.

MJ: I remember that.

SC: (Laugh)

MJ: Do you think the white players got any, either within East Lincoln or in other gyms, got any negative feedback/ reaction from other whites who thought that they shouldn't be . . .

SC: I don't think that they did now. I think they used - when we first started out at East Lincoln, I think that they got a lot of feedback, moreso from fans and parents then from athletes. I know that, I told you earlier, I had a man threaten to shoot my head off for "playing niggers" one time.

MJ: That was just a . . .

SC: This was a fan. This was a fan. Made a trip to the high school and came into my office in the gym and told me that he wanted - since he had known me for so long - that he wanted to make me aware of something. And I said, 'What's that?' He said, 'There's a man that's going to blow your head off if you keep playing all them niggers on your basketball team.' I said, 'Well, I'll tell you what,' and called the man's name, I said, 'You better tell him to make the first shot count. 'Cause if it don't, he's dead.' And that's the last I ever heard of it.

MJ: Alright, that's _____. Inside, can you describe how you were feeling when it . . .

SC: Inside, I was furious. I was mad. Because at the time I had the best five players playing that I could possibly find and I was in P.E. and I was going through every gym class hunting basketball players, because we were trying to build a tradition at East Lincoln that eventually took us to the State. Got beat in the state championship game before I quit coaching. And I searched every gym class so I knew that I had the best five players at East Lincoln High School playing basketball. I knew that. And my next two, the first seven, were the best seven basketball players at East Lincoln High School. If they weren't I'd have gotten them out of that gym class and put a uniform on them.

MJ: Sorry I'm jumping all over the map. I really appreciate your time. Are there any other specific instances that you can remember, related to athletics or your time as principal or . . . where you felt that you were in a difficult position because of having to balance, you know, your _____ with . . .

SC: Well, as principal, I can't think of a - there's so many things that happened over the course of fourteen years as principal and I can't think of a specific one right off the top of my head. But I know that that was a very trying time in almost any school that you went in to at that period of time. And, I think that it has come across as well as could be expected. I know that from the standpoint of most administrators, there's still a lot of pressure involved. With the desegregation process because of a lot of the governmental mandates and also from the county mandates handed down that you could or could not agree with. Some of the record keeping, affirmative action - that kind of stuff. Affirmative

action is one thing that when they tell you that you have to have so many blacks doing this and so many whites doing that and that kind of thing and you know that that's probably [not] for the best interest of your school at that particular time, and yet you still have to go with it. That's the kind of stuff that I'm talking about. The suspension records, those kinds of things. How you discipline one person compared to how you discipline another person of another race. A lot of the special ed kinds of _____ were handed down. There's just a tremendous amount of pressure on school administrators at this point in time. And, a lot of them are not equipped. I think that's why you're seeing so many schools systems hiring deputies to be in the halls. That's to take some of that pressure away from the administrators and let them be school people. When I was principal, we didn't have deputies. You were the law and order of that place and they expect you to look after it. If that meant grabbing somebody by the shirt collar, that's what you did. In most cases, at that time, most of the principals that I knew were ex-coaches. And, I think that had a lot to do with it. That, plus the fact that being able to be second guessed – every coach has been second guessed and every principal is going to be second guessed on a lot of his decisions and you have to learn to have a thick skin or you're not going to survive. Being able to think on your feet. I used to make the statement to some people in a lot of the educational meetings that I'd go to that – I'd tell them right up front that I'm prejudiced. But I want to tell you this: I think every high school principal should have at least coached for at least three years before they ever apply for an administrative position. And I would give those reasons. Thick skin, being able to think on your feet, physically being able to handle yourself and knowing what to do in different situations. I don't think it is as true today with the deputies and the law enforcement being in the schools as it was, say, fifteen/twenty years ago. At that point in time, it was your baby. You had to handle it. And then you had to live with the consequences. . . no matter what they were.

MJ: Do you think the tension between the time that you started coaching had changed by 1996?

SC: Yes. Yes. I think the tension between the races has eased a great deal. But, I still think that you're going to have some blacks that are disliked (phone rings, tape turned off).

SC: What was I sayin'?

MJ: About the tension easing between the seventies and . . .

SC: I think the tensions have eased but I don't think the tensions on the administrators have eased. Well, with the additions of the deputies and stuff, they've eased some, not a great deal. There's so many mandates now that you have . . . I think that the tension between the kids – you're always gonna have a trouble maker, somebody that wants to be a class clown or wants to be cute and sometimes they're black and sometimes they're white and you're going to have this. Anytime you put 1400 kids inside four walls, you're going to have two of

them that don't like each other. Sometimes they're both white, sometimes they're both black, sometimes they're black and white. As long as you keep it disagreements between people instead of race, then. . .

MJ: Again, I thank you so much for your time. I was wondering if you knew of any other people that might be willing to talk to me or might want to talk to me or if you might be willing to talk to me again. . .

SC: Yeah, I'd be glad to talk to you again. Most of the people that I knew have moved on. I'm trying to sit here and think.

MJ: Maybe some of your old players. . .

SC: Most of them are working about every day. I mean, during the day time. I'm trying to think of somebody that would be good. I can't really think of anybody. I'll be willing to talk to you any time. Like I told you to start with, what I say is what I believe and what I've lived, so I'm tellin' you the way it was and what I was feeling at the time.

MJ: I appreciate it. _____ Thank you very much. I have a couple of things for you to look at here, basically this project is part of my grade for this term in my course of Davidson and our professor is involved the Southern Oral History Program which collects interviews with people who lived through certain time periods and puts them in a library. And I was wondering if you would mind if I submitted this interview. If you don't want to do it, I understand.

SC: That would be fine with me. I haven't said anything I don't believe so. . .

MJ: Okay

SC: (Laugh)

MJ: Well then I'll ask you to fill out some forms. Is there anything else you'd like to say?

SC: No, I don't think so.

MJ: Okay.

SC: (To grandson on lap) Hop up buddy, buddy.

MJ: Alright, thank you very much.

(Tape turned off, and then turned back on)

MJ: Mr. Cherry's talking about some of the teachers that were at East Lincoln while he was principal.

SC: The teachers that were at East Lincoln during the desegregation years, the early years, came from Newbold and Rock Springs because those two schools were consolidated and. . . A lot of them had died. As a matter of fact, when I went to East Lincoln High School as principal, it has been seven years since I graduated from Rock Springs and I went in there as a coach and, went in as coach and assistant principal. The biology teacher was my ninth grade science teacher. The typing teacher was my senior home room advisor when I was at Rock Springs. The history teacher was my seventh grade social studies teacher when I was at Rock Springs. The guy who was my assistant coach and also

taught drivers' education did his student teaching my senior year at Rock Springs. I'm trying to think of who else was there. The home ec teacher was my eleventh grade home room teacher. And here, all of a sudden, now, I'm these people's boss. And, a lot of them have died and that - I was trying to think of somebody that would still be around that you could talk to in those early years but most of them have moved on, have gone on and are not here, so... Other than students, and most of them are so wrapped up in their own world, working and so forth. I just happened to think about that.

MJ: Now, were there other teachers from Newbold? Did they come?

SC: There were three. There were three black teachers. One of them was a typing teacher and she taught for me. She was there. She came from Newbold and she taught for me and was hired. The principal at Newbold became assistant Superintendent of Lincoln County Schools and his name was George Massey and he has an elementary school in Lincolnton named after him now. And he has since passed away. And, I'm tryin' to think of who the third one was. There was another black teacher. I can't think of her name. She was in the business department. _____, I believe. Yeah, and she has retired and I think she's passed away.

MJ: Were there any black coaches?

SC: At that point in time, no.

MJ: Do you know when the first...

SC: The first black coach at East Lincoln High School was probably after I became principal there.

MJ: Do you remember, was there any violence connected...

SC: No. No, because he was one of the former players there. He'd been hired and went to high school there and came back. And was well liked when he was there as a player and was totally accepted.

MJ: By whites and everybody?

SC: By whites and blacks.

MJ: Well, thank you very much. I'm so happy that you were willing to talk to me.

SC: Well, things keep popping in my mind. See, your talkin' about 20, 26 or 27 years of my life and I can't remember all of it.

MJ: Oh, I know...

SC: (Laugh)

MJ: I can't even think of all the questions I'm want to ask you. So... Well I will definitely contact you again.

SC: Okay.

MJ: I really appreciate your time.

SC: Oh yeah, yeah.

MJ: Thank you again.

End of Interview