

## TRANSCRIPT: GEORGE STONEY

Interviewee: George Stoney  
Interviewer: John Egerton  
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### START OF INTERVIEW

John Egerton: --autobiography. Where you were born and when and how you got to Chapel Hill, and that's really where I want to [00:19].

George Stoney: I was born in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, July the 1<sup>st</sup>, 1916. My father was a minister of the Christian Church at the time in Winston-Salem. He left his ministry a few years after that. He continued to preach occasionally but he gradually lost his faith in the church and religion finally. I grew up listening to him question his faith right the way through my childhood.

JE: What do you think it was that made him finally--? What was it about it that didn't work for him?

GS: The first thing that didn't work for him was that he grew up in the Church of Ireland, which was the Episcopal Church [01:17] the Church of England almost. He came to this country and met some people in the Church of Christ but they were the more gentle, warm, kind, and so he had a simple religion that was also warm and positive. He was a school teacher and also went to Eastman School--was it Eastman School?--of Business in New England for six months and learned to write contracts and all that kind

of thing, and dabbled in real estate. Then they encouraged him to go to college. So he went to college, I think he started when he was twenty-eight, and went to Transylvania University, part of the University of Kentucky later, but it took him eight years because he had his undergraduate degree and then his degree in theology and learned Latin and Greek and so forth. [Evidently] he was very good.

JE: Got out of there in--?

GS: Got out of there in about 1908, I think around that, because I believe his first appointment was to Cadiz.

JE: Is that right? That was his first church.

GS: First or second, but I'm pretty sure it was the first, when he came to Cadiz, and they recognized a person of education. Here again was a congregation that had a certain amount of gentility and were not the shouting, bickering kind of people that he found when he then got an appointment to a larger church in Winston-Salem, but it was doctrinally split. They were having arguments in the congregation and I'm sure he saw the parallel between that--I mean the contrast between that--and the Moravians we lived near, because very soon after we came to Winston-Salem he bought half of a double house in Salem.

JE: In the village.

GS: In, well it--.

JE: [03:42]

GS: Yes, on South Main Street.

JE: Yeah.

GS: It wasn't a village then; it was just Salem. So while we kept going to the Christian church on Sunday mornings we would go to the Moravian church at night, and he loved the music and he liked the simple sermons and so forth. But we would have Bible reading every morning and he would give us the various readings of the scripture as he knew it from Latin and Greek and why this was that. He started questioning Adam and Eve, telling us it was a metaphor, a legend, a way of explaining the creation, and--.

[Pause; noise in the background]

JE: It's the meter reader.

GS: And later on he started questioning the virgin birth, which of course was the crucial question. [Laughs]

JE: Yeah.

GS: I can remember him talking with people who would come to visit us from the old congregation and he was making them feel very uncomfortable. I can remember as quite a small child sitting there thinking: Daddy, keep your mouth shut. [Laughs] They're happy. Why bother them. You and I know this. [Laughs] But I think the most vivid time I remember was that he obviously was so disturbed by the music, this harsh kind of simplistic kind of music, and he missed the music of the Episcopal Church. He loved the music of the Moravian Church. I was a boy singer so he decided I should go into the Episcopal choir and so he arranged it. But he took me around the little Episcopal church they had at the time and showed me the stages of the cross windows and the crucifix and all of that, and he told me it was all idolatry and I should remember that. I remember a year later carrying the cross in front of the choir, feeling very proud of myself because I was the only person in that church who knew it was all idolatry. [Laughs]

JE: So you grew up being a skeptic.

GS: That's right, but a closet skeptic. There were certain things that we didn't talk with other people about because it would make us outcasts or different, and of course no teenager wants to be different.

JE: I could very easily follow this in another direction because I have an interest in this, obviously, for reasons other than my purpose here, and I would like to do it, in fact I do want to take it one step farther just to ask you about your mother. She would be my relative, blood relative.

GS: Yes.

JE: She was my grandmother's sister.

GS: Well I remember very little of my mother. You know, she died--.

JE: She died--. How old were you when she died?

GS: Well, she died in, what, '22, I think. I was just--.

JE: You were six years old.

GS: Well just five and a half. I remember surprisingly little of her. I remember her sitting next to me on a street car when we were coming back from the hospital where I'd had my tonsils out. I remember her leaning over the bathtub. I remember only one or two other strange things.

JE: Yeah. [07:56]

GS: I remember the funeral. Oh, God, I remember the funeral very vividly.

JE: Where was it, in Winston-Salem?

GS: It was in Winston-Salem in our front parlor, and, God, I think the most vivid memory [is] of the women's kid gloves patting my head. [Laughs] The women all wore

these kid gloves and, oh, looking down [on me]. Also one of the most touching scenes with my father was the night she was laid in state in the front parlor and my father taking me in to see her the night before, and I noticed that she was wearing her wedding ring, and he insisted that she be buried with the wedding ring.

JE: You never saw your grandparents, Kentucky grandparents?

GS: Never saw them--that I recall.

JE: Yeah.

GS: I think I was taken to them early.

JE: Before she died.

GS: That's right.

JE: Afterward, never.

GS: No, no. The story is, and I'd be interested to find your version of it, the story--and of course you should talk to Kat--but the story that I have is that when Mother died the relatives arrived for the funeral. I don't know how many came, but they had a plan that each of the children was to be taken by one or another of the aunts, with just the assumption that my father couldn't possibly look after them. Then there was the very severely handicapped child, Julia, who was--. [Telephone rings; break in recording] You see there were the four of us plus Julia, this severely handicapped child.

JE: How old was she?

GS: I don't know.

JE: Where did she fit in the--.

GS: She became--. She was born before Libba.

JE: Uh huh. Was it Kat and then you and then--?

GS: No, Kat, "Bony"--Martha--then me, then Julia,--

JE: And then Libba.

GS: --then Libba.

JE: Okay.

GS: Julia, you know, finally had to be put into an institution and she died there soon afterward.

JE: Soon afterwards, as a child?

GS: Yes, that's right.

JE: Okay. So she would have been under six.

GS: That's right.

JE: You were only six or five and a half.

GS: That's right, yeah.

JE: And so there were two children younger than you.

GS: That's right.

JE: And then two older but not all that much older.

GS: Well, Kat was born in 1910, so she was six years older.

JE: She was six years older.

GS: That's right.

JE: She was twelve years old.

GS: That's right.

JE: And so from the perspective of this Kentucky family here are five children under twelve, one of them severely handicapped, and--.

GS: And they had worked out this plan to take us, and they knew that my father was not well, that he no longer had a church, that he was making his living by selling vacuum cleaners and brushes, [Laughs] and renting some houses that he'd built for blacks. That's what we lived on most of the time was the rental from these shotgun houses.

JE: Is that right?

GS: And how the hell he could make it. And of course it sounded--. I'm sure to them it sounded very logical, but he was very angry according to what I've been told, and simply cut us off from any real contact with the Cadiz people from then on, you see. Well, as they predicted, within less than two years he had to find a place in the country for us, and so for two years we lived in East Bend.

JE: Where is that?

GS: It's about eighteen miles outside of Winston-Salem--twenty miles--in Yadkin County. So we spent--.

JE: Is it like a boarding [12:11]?

GS: Well he found--. For two years he had a series of white housekeepers, each one worse than the one before. [Laughs] It just didn't work at all, and I'm sure working with my father was no gift either, because he was not well and he had a short temper and so forth. So finally he found Mrs. Apperson, good hearted old lady, and her daughter of about twenty-two. She had a big family, she had a fairly big house in the country, and she took us. What he paid her I don't know, but he'd come out every other weekend to see us, on the bus.

JE: Just the woman and her daughter?

GS: And her daughter, in the house, and she took all of us, the four of us. I do have very vivid memories of those two years, which you may want to record at some time.

JE: Did you go to school during that--?

GS: Oh, yes.

JE: You started to school during that time.

GS: No, we--. I started--. The first year I went to Central School in Salem, Salem Central School, the public school there, so I had--. Martha was one year ahead of me. So I went to that school for one year and didn't learn to read because I knew all the stories from Martha's time so I could turn through the book and read [Laughs].

JE: Uh huh, tell the story.

GS: And I didn't learn to read. I got out to East Bend that next year and [a peculiar] thing had happened. The old school had burned and they were building a new school on that property, so they rented an old house just near the Apperson's, right across the way in fact, and turned that into a school. It was about the time when North Carolina started subsidizing county contributions to the schools [14:18] to try to improve them, so counties got paid a certain amount per school day for people who came. So the county started enforcing the school leaving age, which was fourteen, so more than half my second grade were people between twelve and fourteen, and I saw pregnancies, I--.  
[Laughs]

JE: [Laughs] Wow.

GS: What I learned in that second grade, you wouldn't--. [Laughs]

JE: Wow.

GS: Of course--. And by the way, the county was completely white. I don't think a black was allowed to live in that county. You know, it was one of those white, Sauratown Mountain counties.

JE: Yeah.

GS: And also they were supplementing--. They were raising teacher standards and so you couldn't get the state subsidy if your teacher didn't have at least two years of college. Now before this time the schools had been operated by teachers who had finished high school and then had usually had a couple of summers of teacher training, and these were country girls who really could control these classes. Instead we got girls from Greensboro, the cities, who'd had two years of college, maybe more, and they were having to live with the families in East Bend, having to control these kids who are coming to school for the first time who are as big as they were. Oh, a very touching remembrance: We were having a spelling bee and on the board were all the places you moved if you spelled the words right. We started at East Bend and the goal was to get to Greensboro, where this teacher had come from. [Laughs] And, you know, with a wood stove. The second and third grade were in class together, and again I didn't learn to read, and--.

JE: You were there one year or two?

GS: Two years.

JE: And still didn't learn.

GS: That's right. The first year for some reason my father wouldn't--this crazy class business--he wouldn't let me wear overalls to school. Can you imagine--

JE: Yeah, I can.

GS: --the torture that was?

JE: Sure.

GS: To have to wear short pants to school when everybody had--and the joy the next year when he allowed me to wear overalls to school. I'll never forget that. Oh, boy, I was in. But I didn't learn to read. I think after two years he realized that Katherine, who really was having a lot of the burden of the family,--.

JE: Who was then fourteen.

GS: --was not getting what she should be getting out of the high school, because the high school was just starting there. He, I don't think, realized that I wasn't reading until I got back to town. Then he did the absolutely wrong thing. He found some baby books to teach me to read. He was trying to teach me to read, and I was stupid, and he lost his temper, and almost the only time I can remember anything like corporal punishment he threw the book at me, he was so distressed. Then in fairly typical fashion he turned his back on the truth and ignored the fact that I couldn't read. But I used to go with him to the library because he loved to--.

JE: He was a real scholar, wasn't he?

GS: Oh, yes. He loved to go to the public library. I started picking up the Tom--. What was it, Tom Tidwell? No. It was like the Rover Boys books, Tom Tidwell books, or something like that. You know, *Tom Tidwell and the* [18:46],--

JE: [18:46]

GS: --*Tom Tidwell Goes to Sicily*, [Laughs] whatever it is. Somehow I stumbled into reading those things, and the next time, about two years later--this may be an exaggeration; maybe it was a little later than that--he found me reading *Elmer Gantry* and

was so absolutely outraged at the filth I was reading, and how did--? Well I'd been given it by the librarian, because I'd read *Main Street* and *Babbitt*, so, you know. I was about eleven years old by that time.

JE: Yeah.

GS: But how I got to Chapel Hill was interesting.

JE: Let me interrupt you and ask when did your father die?

GS: My father died in 1944.

JE: So this is going to be on farther quite a way on into the story. You all went back to Winston-Salem and lived in town then the rest of your school?

GS: That's right. He brought us back the summer that I was nine and we lived there until I went away to--. Well I went away to school when we lived in South Main Street, the same house, until I guess--. I'm not sure when. Kat will have to tell you. Martha--"Bony"--married and moved to Ardmore and Daddy moved in with her, but I don't have that chronology quite right because you see I was away all that time.

JE: Yeah. Well in the years--.

GS: No, no, no, I'm sorry. He continued to live in the South Main Street house until after I went away to the army because I visited him there.

JE: I see.

GS: No, no, and so the--.

JE: So you all went back to Winston-Salem and lived for a long time in the same house,--

GS: In the same house, oh, yes.

JE: --and during those years he was selling vacuum cleaners?

GS: Selling vacuum cleaners, he was selling--. He went into all kinds of strange business ventures. For example he and some other people used to buy carloads of oranges and [Laughs] they'd pull them to a railroad side and people would come and buy the oranges. Mostly our income came from--.

JE: The rentals.

GS: --six or seven houses. He bought a number of pieces of real estate, little pieces, you know, lot size, and he built wooden houses on them to rent to blacks. I visited them often with him. Sometimes he'd go to collect the rent; sometimes the people would come to his house to pay the rent. Each of them had a toilet out back, a flush toilet but out back, not built into the house, no running water in the house that I recall. There was a--. [Pause]

JE: A cistern and a well, or--?

GS: Just a--. No, not a well, but--.

JE: A pump.

GS: Not a pump, no, just a faucet outside. They paid I think about seven dollars a week. I later figured out that they must have repaid the cost of those houses about every three or four years. And so in effect that's what we lived on.

JE: He never remarried.

GS: He never remarried.

JE: Never had, as far as you know, any other--?

GS: I just couldn't have imagined anything like that. [Laughs] In fact I never thought about my father as a sexual person.

JE: Uh huh.

GS: I just couldn't--. [Laughs]

JE: You just couldn't even--.

GS: No. It never even occurred to me until long after he died Martha showed me a letter that he'd written Mother that was far from explicit,--

JE: Yeah.

GS: --but--.

JE: But still a far stretch from your image of him.

GS: Yeah, but a really personal, affectionate letter. Funny, the things that stick in your mind. I remember asking him something about a gift shop, and he said something about wasn't it nice that people had a place they could buy things to bring home, and he mentioned his connections with [23:50] Candy Kitchen because he used to buy a gift to bring home to Mother, after he'd been on the road.

JE: George, he never went back to Ireland?

GS: He never went back to Ireland.

JE: Never had any further contact with his family there?

GS: Yes, he had continuous contact with Aunt Anna. Aunt Anna and another sister were nurses.

JE: They were his mother's or his father's sisters?

GS: They were his--. No, no, I'm sorry, my Aunt Anna, his sisters.

JE: They were his sisters.

GS: His sisters, oh, yes. They left Ireland and started a hospital in England and they wrote some things about--. One of the sisters--. They were both involved in a hospital in the First World War that went to France, and one of them died of radium

poisoning, one of the earliest people to use radium. Aunt Anna was a very faithful correspondent. She used to send us-- I remembered the rolled up magazines, the *Illustrated London News* and *St. Nicholas* every year, you know, the Christmas edition.

JE: Yeah.

GS: He and she wrote back and forth quite regularly.

JE: Is that right? Do you know why he came to this country? Was there some particular reason?

GS: Well it was 1893, I believe it was. Things were very bad in Ireland.

JE: It was an Irish depression, potato famine?

GS: Yes. He was a son of a, quote, good family but had fallen on hard times, and his father had died in 1870. They immediately left the Aran Islands and went to Dublin where they were the kind of poor relations of people there in [26:26] Square, so he grew up in [26:29] Square. Shortly after the War I went back there and talked to some of the relatives about it and there was some suggestion that he couldn't find a job and the Bellhouses, the relatives, had come to this country and had a drugstore in Kissimmee, Florida and they invited him to come over to work with them. He had a passage on a boat and something happened that that didn't go through and he came on, not steerge, but one place, you know, everybody, but one of those big ships that left Cork, I guess it was.

JE: Yeah.

GS: Or it might have been-- Yes, Cork, it must have been, because instead of going to England he went overland to Cork and then came around. But it was one of those ships that had lots and lots of Irish immigrants, came to New York. He told us very

little about that. He went through Castle Gardens, not Ellis Island, because I guess it was just the year before they transferred to Ellis Island. He told me with some bitterness about being exploited by a fellow Irishman who met him at the dock and offered him a room in a rooming house at supposedly a very cheap price and it turned out to be full of bedbugs. [Laughs] It's interesting how he never liked--. He always had uncomplimentary things to say about the Irish.

JE: Is that so?

GS: Oh, he was more English than the English.

JE: I'll be.

GS: Anything that was good about Ireland was put there because of the English. He almost never talked about the Aran Islands and he was very anti-Catholic, very anti-Catholic. We never understood why, of course.

JE: Yeah.

GS: To us the Catholics were just other, [Laughs] another sect down the street. Johnny Wiggins was a Catholic. [Laughs] We couldn't understand why.

JE: Well did he go to Kissimmee, Florida?

GS: He went to--oh, yes.

JE: That was the first place he--?

GS: He got on a train and went to Kissimmee, Florida where he worked with the Bellhouses, and by the way we stayed in touch with the Bellhouses for many years after that because their daughter married somebody in Philadelphia and they used to come visit us every year and send us chocolate Easter eggs. He went to Kissimmee then became a school teacher at another place, and I'll remember it in just a few minutes, in northern

Florida where there was school only six months a year, but he had this public school education in Ireland so he was educated.

JE: Right.

GS: And he was selected as a school teacher.

JE: He must have been, what, eighteen or so?

GS: No, no. Let's see, he was born in 1868 and--.

JE: Well he was twenty-five years old or so when he came to this country.

GS: That's right. He was selected as a school teacher and the school was in the station house because there were only two trains a day. Otherwise it was sitting there empty. I think he got paid twenty dollars a month but he had to furnish the wood for the stove.

JE: This was in North Florida somewhere?

GS: North Florida. I'll think of the name of the place in just a moment.

Otherwise he worked on a farm. He evidently worked on the farm of the man of the family he lived with, because he used to tell me how difficult it was to handle the horses and how cold it was in the morning, and then how hot it was in the middle of the day and how cold it was at night, and how cold that station was. But he was always very proud of the fact that he was a school teacher there and those people were the people who converted him into the Christian Church.

JE: I see.

GS: I wish I knew the names and so forth because they were obviously people who treated him with great respect and that was something that was terribly important to Father all the time. He wanted to be treated with respect. You see I never saw my father

without a collar and tie until I was about eighteen, and I remember the shock of seeing his naked arms. [Laughs]

JE: Yeah. I can relate to that. How did he get from North Florida to Transylvania?

GS: Well Kat can tell you much better than I can, but he went to this Eastman Business School. I guess it was Eastman.

JE: Up East.

GS: Up East, yes, because he used to have in the library--. In his library he used to have picture brochures of places in New England--Connecticut, Rhode Island--where the school was. He went there for a few months and learned this Palmer pen--penmanship, anyway. It wasn't Palmer, it was--.

JE: It was another.

GS: And wrote beautifully all his life, then drew up contracts for people, that kind of thing. They encouraged him to go to Transylvania to become a minister.

JE: I see.

GS: My assumption is that he was a man who should have gone into academic pursuits.

JE: Yeah, right.

GS: And this seemed to be a way to do it.

JE: And so he ended up going from Ireland, to Florida, to New England, to Kentucky.

GS: That's right.

JE: He was just sort of bouncing back and forth.

GS: That's right, but he went back to Florida after that, you see.

JE: Oh, after Transylvania.

GS: After Trans--. Oh, yes, he went back and evidently did fairly well because when he went to college he had a fair amount of savings. Now where he accumulated the money to buy that land in Winston-Salem I don't know but I think he kind of squirreled it away [34:36].

JE: Well then how did he get from--. If he went back to Florida how did he then end up back at Cadiz?

GS: Well you see Transylvania was the--.

JE: Was [like the] theological school.

GS: That right so that's why he went there.

JE: Yeah.

GS: And when he graduated from Transylvania he got this appointment.

JE: I thought you said he went back to Florida after Transylvania.

GS: No, not after Transylvania, no.

JE: Okay, so, yeah, I can see how he'd get from Lexington to Cadiz.

GS: That's right, that's why he got [35:04]. But Kat is going to be much more reliable on this than I.

JE: By that time though he's thirty-some odd years old--

GS: Oh, yes. Yes, you see--.

JE: --when he went to Cadiz.

GS: That's one of the reasons why Grandmother had nothing but negative pictures of him.

JE: Yeah.

GS: That's why she was so much against the--.

JE: The marriage.

GS: The marriage. Here was a foreigner,--.

JE: An old man.

GS: --an old man.

JE: Yeah.

GS: But not in Irish terms.

JE: No.

GS: As you know the typical Irish picture was you don't marry until your mother dies. [Laughs] You know you go back home and look after your mother and when she finally dies then you marry somebody, [Laughs] if you haven't cooled the fires of sex with whiskey.

JE: Right. And your father probably didn't think too much of her either, of Julia Crenshaw.

GS: I don't know.

JE: His mother-in-law.

GS: He--.

JE: I suspect he probably would not have been kindly disposed.

GS: Oh, of course he always had great admiration for the doctor.

JE: Yeah.

GS: But evidently she was very much against the marriage, even though he was marrying a woman who was about to be an old maid. She was--.

JE: She was no spring chicken.

GS: She was twenty-six, wasn't she?

JE: Yeah. I mean that's old.

GS: Exactly. I think she was twenty-six.

JE: That sounds about right.

GS: But she--. Oh, yes, I have another very vivid memory of my mother standing at the bottom of the stairs--we had this big open stairway; [Laughs] [strange, the] architecture, the inside of this house--standing at the bottom of the stairs, calling for my father, and she always addressed him as "Mr. Stoney" or "your father." I never heard my mother address him by his first name, never.

JE: What was his first name?

GS: George.

JE: His name was George?

GS: Oh, yes. His name was George Henry Castle, but it was always "your father,"--

JE: Or "Mr. Stoney."

GS: --or "Mr. Stoney," yeah.

JE: You were going to tell me a minute ago about how you got to Chapel Hill.

GS: Oh, how I got to Chapel Hill. For reasons which only other people can tell you I was a part of an experiment to push people from the Central School--when we came back to Winston-Salem we went to Central School but it had moved to another building at that time--accelerate us to go to high school in the middle of the year, so at the age of thirteen I was in high school. So even though I did miserably in high school

academically [Laughs] they kept promoting us, and so I finished high school in the middle of the year of '32 and then went back for another spring to learn typing and take some other courses [38:30]. I had a paper route and so I was independently wealthy.

[Laughs] I mean I--.

JE: You had an income.

GS: I had an income, which my sisters didn't have [and a lot of other people didn't]. I mean that was substantial.

JE: Sure. It was the Depression.

GS: I'd always pedaled papers or worked in a store or something so I hadn't had to ask my father for anything since I was ten, which I'm sure always made a difference with my sisters. [Very difficult.]

JE: Yeah.

GS: But a fellow came by--. I never thought about going to college. We couldn't afford it. Katherine had just been to Salem College for one year and she couldn't afford to keep on, and she was the bright one. She was the scholar.

JE: Yeah.

GS: A fellow came by from Chapel Hill to talk to us in high school about college, [and other recruiters], so the counselors had us all in, and he told us about a self help program. You could work your way through. [I listened], but I had no idea that I was going there. But I was going to work in a cotton mill, a knitting mill, because I was giving a free paper to a foreman there who told me he was going to find me a job in cotton. For sure he could get me a job in cotton. [Laughs] I had no idea what it was like

working in a mill; it was going to be a job. Of course secretly I was going to be a writer. All the way through high school I was--.

JE: Really?

GS: Oh, goodness, I was going to be the next Thomas Wolfe. [Laughs] I wrote and I dreamed about all this. It was my secret dream, [no question]. So it didn't matter what I was going to do. It would be an adventure you see, that I could write about.

JE: Sure.

GS: I had no idea what it was going to be like in the cotton mill, but he told me he was going to get me this job and it was going to start September the 1<sup>st</sup> [when a place opened up.] I'd been giving him this free paper for months and months and months. So I actually trained in my replacement, and I'm sure I bragged about, I got a job [Laughs]. And when it came September the 1<sup>st</sup> he told me that another foreman's son had gotten the job, and I was so embarrassed that I took forty-seven dollars of my savings out of the bank and went to Chapel Hill, having--

JE: To save face.

GS: --no idea how I was going to stay there. I went to the YMCA--

JE: This was in the fall of '32?

GS: That's right, fall of--

JE: Or '33?

GS: --'33, fall of '33. Yeah, that's right, fall of '33. I went to the headquarters for self help which was at the YMCA. You've seen the, you know, the--. You've been to Chapel Hill, you know,--

JE: Yes.

GS: --right to the west of the South Building, that little open plaza.

JE: Yeah.

GS: And to see this guy whose name I can't recall now. There were a whole bunch of fellows milling around and I found that they had all been asked to come there because they were going to work in the dining hall, Swain Hall, and they were probably two weeks ahead of school. They'd come to scrub the floors down and clean the place up and get everything going for the school, and they all had places. You worked three hours a day for your food and that was that. Well I wasn't among them, my name wasn't on the list, but I just went along with them and started scrubbing, started washing dishes, started eating, and only three weeks later did they find that I wasn't on the list, but hell, I can work. [Laughs]

JE: Yeah. So you were--.

GS: So I was right in there, and I found that you could get a place in a professor's house working an hour a day, mowing the lawn or looking after the kids or whatever it was, so I got a place in a professor's house so I had my room and my board. Then I found that--. Tuition I think was twenty-five dollars a quarter, something like that. There were three quarters; you had a quarter system. But you didn't have to pay it at the beginning; you only had to pay it when you took your exam. You couldn't take the exam if you didn't pay it.

JE: I see.

GS: So I was in school and it was what we now call open enrollment [43:45] academically because the theory was that anybody who had a certificate from a valid high school in North Carolina should be able to get into the University, even though the

University then would make you take competency exams and if you couldn't pass those you took remedial classes for which you didn't get credit.

JE: Yeah, right, [but you were enrolled.]

GS: But you were in Chapel Hill and you gradually caught up. So I think at least two of the four classes I was taking as a freshman were remedial, even though I came from a better high school. But I was in school, and at the end of the term--. At that time I was also working for the self help department, washing windows and pouring concrete. I think I made seventeen cents an hour pouring concrete [Laughs] the hardest work I ever had. I couldn't quite pay my bills so I took my typewriter down and pawned it at Abernathy's book shop, and that became a ritual after awhile, [Laughs] [and just keeping the money and not pay it back], and I was there for four years.

JE: Did you not go back to home much to live? I mean did you ever go back there to live after that?

GS: Oh, no, never went back to live. I visited, you know, regularly.

JE: Sure, yeah, but that was effectively your departure from the family.

GS: Oh, yes, sure. A very happy memory of my father was two years later, I think it was, I stayed in Chapel Hill and had a job looking after a fraternity house that was going to be empty, and he came down and spent a week with me, and it was the only time I can ever remember us having a really companionable time together.

JE: At the end of your sophomore year, or something like that?

GS: About, yeah. I took him to the library. I took him to the book shop.

JE: He must have loved that.

GS: It was--.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcriber: Deborah Mitchum

Date: January 11, 2010

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Interview

with

GEORGE STONEY

June 13, 1991

By John Egerton

Transcribed by Jovita Flynn

Project funded by the  
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The Southern Oral History Program  
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

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START OF TAPE 1, SIDE B

June 13, 1992

(Tape 1, SIDE A is not transcribed re John Egerton)

JOHN EGERTON: Being a liberal, that was your phrase. Not a citadel but a sanctuary, a nice distinction. You went there [to the University of North Carolina] in [19]'33 as a student and came out in '37?

GEORGE STONEY: August of '37.

JE: And somewhere along in that time, you became a sort of self-conscious, liberal, progressive, issue-interested and oriented person. Is that a fair statement?

GS: Yes, very fair.

JE: Why and how do you suppose that happened in that four year period?

GS: I wish I knew [laughter].

JE: Do you have any clue?

GS: I don't have any clues. Because of my father being an outsider, I had thought like an outsider. I had my secret dream that I was going to be novelist. I had a high school teacher who introduced me to Thomas Wolfe. I had been reading Sinclair Lewis. But politically, I had no orientation whatsoever. Just why I started reading the New Republic [laughter], why I started thinking New Deal, all of that, I haven't the least idea. Because I sold the Literary Digest as a kid, I read a lot more in public affairs than the normal kid.

JE: Were you in the journalism school?

GS: Well, I majored in English and journalism. I got my degree in English, but I took a number of courses in journalism with Philips Russel. I'm sure Philips Russel had some influence.

JE: He was something of a socialist?

GS: Yes, we all kind of assumed he was socialist, and we knew that he had traveled with IWW. He had bummed around with radicals, and of course, there was Paul Green there.

JE: Did you have any contact with him?

GS: Yes, though he wouldn't remember it, I would. The first play I was in was in House of Connelly which he wrote. Then I remember I was in Show My Body Down which is another one of his plays.

JE: So you got to know him a little bit, at least knew about his work?

GS: I knew about his work. We were greatly influenced by his work, of course, and all the folk plays that people wrote that many people look down on now, saying that they weren't genuine and that they were written by people out of New Jersey. But there were some fine ones. I remember a number of them that were written right out of people's direct experience. And of course, Green did that series of plays for the Negro theater, from In Abraham's Bosom on. So those things, I'm sure, had an effect.

JE: The social science people, did you have any contact with any of them?

GS: Well, I took courses in sociology. I took two courses in sociology.

JE: Under Odum, Vance?

GS: Not under Odum, and not under Vance. I'm just trying to remember the two men, he was kind of a third ranking man there, but I took courses there, and I knew about Odum's work. And I knew about the University Press.

JE: That was going to be my next question. Did you have any association with the Press or any of the people who were writing for the press?

GS: Well, interesting thing is that I had association with a lot of people in Chapel Hill because I had a newspaper route. [Laughter] So I met a number of them in their carpet slippers. It's interesting when I was in the army, just when I became a lieutenant, I went into the Officer's Mess in London and was greeted by somebody from Chapel Hill. [Laughter]

JE: Who'd been on your paper route?

GS: Who'd been on my paper route, and he introduced me as his student and so forth and so on [laughter]. He had no idea that he remembered me as a paper boy.

JE: Well, you know, the reason I keep asking these questions about Chapel Hill is that I have this sense in which Chapel Hill was the only university in the entire southeast, all the way from Virginia to Texas, the only university with a clear image of a progressive, involved, somewhat liberal institution, trying to ameliorate the problems of the South.

GS: Well, certainly Graham and the persona of Graham was extremely important. We all knew that he was fighting David Clark, because that appeared in the student newspaper. If you

look at the student newspaper from those years, you'll find that it's pretty generally liberal for the time, though there's almost nothing about race, but certainly about labor, defense of Frank Graham. Graham's public stances were known to everybody on the campus, sometimes lamented, because, oh, the legislature is not going to give us enough money because of Graham. And then other people knew damn well that Graham would get more money for us.

JE: But that meant, though, that people really saw him as a liberal.

GS: No question.

JE: He was a left-winger.

GS: No question about that. Some people liked it. A great many more forgave him for it, because Dr. Frank was such a good man you couldn't hold anything against him, even his mistakes. It was an interesting approach. The resident, accused communist--he never admitted it, I don't know that he was--was, of course, Erickson.

JE: What was his first name?

GS: I'm ashamed to say, I don't know. He was a professor.

JE: In what field?

GS: I don't know. I think it was history, but I don't know. But he had been singled out as one of the people David Clark often wrote about in the Southern Textile Bulletin. So he was constantly being criticized, and the University was criticized for not kicking him out.

JE: Well, the University went through this period that I'm interested in, from the mid-30s, let's say, until right at the

time of Brown or a little before Brown in '54. The University of North Carolina, well, let's just say, up until the time Frank Graham lost his Senate seat. He had gone to the Senate in '49.

GS: He was appointed.

JE: He was appointed to fill an unexpired term, and then he was only in the Senate for a little over a year, I think, and then lost when he ran for the full term. In that stretch, from the mid-30s to 1950, the University of North Carolina, I mean, it prided itself on being a liberal, progressive institution in many ways--the press, the Odum group, and all that, and Graham himself, and, I'm sure, others as well. After that, my sort of thesis is that it became, as all the other institutions had remained more or less through this period, just not a factor in the social evolution of the South.

GS: Well, I think that when I went there it was content to be the educational and cultural center for the state. Many people I knew there regarded that as the University's mission, not to be a great national university. We had our people who came down from the north to go there, and we had our quota--I shouldn't say quota--we had our share of Jews from the north, who brought many, many ideas that were radical, as well as otherwise. But that was its mandate. The Playmakers toured the high schools. In fact, the first time I remember being stirred in a theater was at, I think, three one-act plays that were given in the Reynolds Auditorium in Winston-Salem, the high school auditorium, brought by the Playmakers. One was called The Valiant, and the second was the one that Paul Green wrote about

Ocracoke, a rewrite of Ride us to the Sea. I forget what the third one was. But boy! My whole attitude towards the theater was set by that evening. These were strong, socially conscious plays. I'm sure I was also influenced by the fact that we had as one of the high school teachers, I never studied with him, was J.O. Bailey, who had been a Playmaker, and taught drama in our high school. One of his students, who later became his wife, wrote Strike Song. There was Roads and Rain, and then she wrote Strike Song about labor struggle, and that was carried to Chapel Hill. So there was all that.

JE: So there's just a lot of currents there. And you came out of there in '37. Do you think looking back on it now that you could clearly see your own transformation or your awakening or your sort of rite of passage into political interests in all those things?

GS: I don't know if it was political influence and my interest in politics so much, because, you know, every middle class southern boy had to be interested in politics. That was just in the air all the time. You always knew who was running [laughter] for judge. You always knew who you'd vote for even if you weren't voting. You know, your family would vote. I mean, politics was our amusement. But in terms of political ideas, political philosophy, that was something entirely different [laughter].

JE: And where were you on that in 1937?

GS: Oh, by '37, I was a dyed-in-the-wool New Dealer. Oh, heavens, yes! I don't know that I had any more than that. I

knew that I was supposed to be for labor, though I didn't know quite why. I knew that I was supposed to be sympathetic with Negroes. I understood that.

JE: Did you have any acquaintance with any Negro people in '37?

GS: Not really. I had them on my paper routes. I had known a few blacks who worked with us, Mary and Celia, who were servants in our house, you know, from the family that lived over on Happy Hill, and one or another of them would come over and work in our house. But no. The first person of color whom I knew as an intellectual equal, or one I would assume was an intellectual equal, was a mulatto woman who worked for the YWCA, and Katherine [Stoney] introduced me to her. As you know, the YW was way ahead of anybody else in that. And I forget this woman's name, but I remember how startled I was once when she was talking about going to all of these interracial meetings with women. And the women were always saying that it was all right to sit down and work with blacks, but the thing we absolutely don't want is intermarriage because terrible things would happen with that. And she said, "You know, every once in a while I look in the mirror and think, what have they got against me? Look at my color." [Laughter] And suddenly, you know, I had just exactly, "Of course, we don't want intermarriage. Of course, the world will fall apart if you had intermarriage." And then I heard that. Here was this woman whose intellect I could admire.

JE: Kind of a revelation.

GS: I didn't even respond to her quite as a black because her speech and her looks and so forth were different. So I could associate with her intellectually, you see, without having that distance of smell and stereotypical thick lips and so forth. It would have constantly gotten in the way otherwise. I'm revealing myself [laughter]. But it wasn't there. Oh God, I guess it was '46 or '47, no, no, it was just two years after that when I started working the Myrdal study.

JE: Yeah, '39.

GS: That I realized people who smelled like blacks and looked like blacks [laughter] and talked like blacks could also be my intellectual equals and all of that. It's interesting how fast that came. I'm sure it was because of these four years at Chapel Hill.

JE: Okay, let's take the year right after that, '37 and '38. Did you go to New York then right out of school?

GS: No, what happened was that after I finished Chapel Hill in September, end of August, I had to get some more credits off to finish in summer school. I'd been writing feature stories for the Raleigh News and Observer during my time at Chapel Hill. I was planning to go to library school. I was working in the library, and I was very good at my job and I loved the job. I'd found a little nest of security [laughter] and I wanted to hold on to it. We had a library school there. And then I got fired from my job at the library. My job just ended. It was an NYA job, and suddenly I was out and I panicked. I went over to Raleigh to see if I could get any more feature stories, and

Smethurst, who was managing editor, offered me a job. Then, as I think I told you, I thought, you know, I haven't been able to travel much. Wouldn't it be interesting if I could hitchhike and write a column a day and a feature story every Sunday, and I could make as much money as he's offering, which was a whole \$25.00 a week which was a lot of money. I was also, I suspect, a little bit worried by the fact that Jim Daniels, my great friend at Chapel Hill, already was working at the News and Observer, and Jim was so much smarter than me. I knew he was so much better than me [laughter]. And I suspect--it just hit me right now--I suspect I was afraid of that competition. Anyway, Smethhurst said, "Sure, go ahead and try it." So I traveled for several months, wrote these columns, which were published in the News and Observer, and then when I got to New Orleans, lucked into a job on a combination passenger and freighter as a deckhand. Didn't know until I got out on the Mississippi that I was a strike breaker [laughter]. I got hired just, you know, a day before the ship sailed. We had a NMU [National Maritime Union] spy on board [laughter], so I found out all about that. Went down the coast of South America, working as a deckhand, cadet, they called it. When I came back, I found that I needed an operation, the doctor told me, for a fistula. He told me that if I would go to New York I could have it done at the Veteran's Hospital for free, because as a Merchant seaman, as I turned out to be [laughter], I could get it done. I had by three months service. So I went there and had it out and then I was in New York.

JE: Then it was. . . ?

GS: January of '38. And I had these introductions from Frank Manny to people in New York. Frank Manny was the former principal of the Ethical Culture School in New York. You know what the Ethical Culture Society is. He'd been there for many, many, many years. He must have come there very early because Louis Hine was a student of his, and Hine came there as a teacher in the 1902, '03, or '04. And Paul Strand was there right after that. Anyway, Manny retired, I guess, in his early sixties, and for two winters had, he and his wife, an apartment in Chapel Hill. They would told teas, literary teas, and there were always having visitors come through. They would have us as students come over and meet these people, and I got to be very friendly with Manny, and he was very thoughtful in helping students. So he gave me introductions to lots of people, very liberal people. As I told you, one of them was John Dewey [laughter]. I spent a wonderful time with Dewey. Louis Hine, Paul Kellogg was editor of the survey and so forth. So when I got to New York, in addition to writing a few feature stories for the travel section of the New York Times, I got a job for my keep and my room, my food and room, at the Henry Street Settlement, and that gave me a place where I could live. 'Course, immediately exposed me to [laughter] a wealth of liberal ideas, because we all sat around this big table every night. The whole idea of the settlement was that we would have these bright, young people there, people from the neighborhood, and then we would get people like LaGuardia and Elmer Bontacue, the British MP, and all these people would come

and sit with us, and they'd get educated, and we'd get educated. So it couldn't have been a better place.

JE: And you stayed in New York then until you went to work for Myrdal?

GS: I stayed in New York until January of '40, though I did travel. A fellow southerner and I dreamed up the idea, Calvin Kyle and two or three others I got hooked on it, John Creedy and some others, we were planning to have a southern news magazine, called South. I think we actually worked up a dummy issue, and in the summer of '39 I traveled quite extensively through the South, partly to help the Southern Conference for Human Welfare and partly to see if we could get financial support for this magazine. I had come down south before to the original Southern Conference as a reporter for the Survey.

JE: November of '38.

GS: And I had come back to see my family, but essentially I was in New York from the middle of January in '38 until I left the first of January, 1940.

JE: It was during that time that you met Thomas Wolfe?

GS: I met Thomas Wolfe in the late spring of '38, because it was just before he took that last train trip through the West. So I met him for a number of meetings.

JE: He died in '38.

GS: So it was just before that.

JE: Let me ask, I don't want to linger too long on Wolfe, but I wonder if you came away from your acquaintance with him

with any sense of what his politics were or how he felt about race and the other issues?

GS: In the first place, a very accurate--far more accurate than I can remember--description of these meetings are in an article I wrote, called "Eugene Returns to Pulpit Hill," which was published in the Carolina Magazine and then republished in a book of essays by Wormser about people who knew Wolfe. I've read it recently, and I think it's a fairly accurate thing.

JE: Where was it first published?

GS: It was published in the Carolina Magazine, the year after I left, '39, I guess. Because John Creedy, who was a great friend of mine in Chapel Hill, either a year or two years behind me, was then the editor. He wrote me and said would you write this article. He knew I had met Wolfe and spent time with him. So with his goading and then his good editorship--thank goodness, he edited the piece--it did appear.

JE: Do you think of it as dealing at all with race?

GS: No. Let me talk to you about Wolfe and race. His anti-semitism was evident in his books, though I must say, and this is pretty self-revealing, I thought it far more anti-Yankeeism, with being a northern Jew as the most [laughter] Yankee. You know what I mean [laughter]. By that time, I had met enough of the educated, cultured Jews, northerners, who were contemptuous of southerners, to understand what he was getting at. I remember feeling so irritated because they would either say, "Well, you've not very southern," meaning that you don't hate all blacks [laughter], measuring your southernness with how

much you hated Negroes, or they would patronize me because I was kind of this little, liberal southerner who they could show off at their cocktail parties. I don't know which irritated me more.

JE: But as far as blacks were concerned, did Wolfe. . .

GS: I don't remember ever hearing him refer to blacks one way or the other. It's interesting about his attitude towards politics. You get it in, "I Have a Thing to Tell You." He had a bad conscience about not being more political because you expected it. You see that in William Shirer's book, The Berlin Diary, in which he recalls a meal he had with Wolfe, and Wolfe was apologizing for not being more political, because he was supposed to me.

JE: It was a political time.

GS: That's right. I was with him a night when the phone rang, and he picked up the phone and talked, and stuttered into the phone as he often did, "I-I-I don't see why I-I-I should come. You don't need me there. You've got the Budapest String Quartet, what do you need me for?" Long talk on the other end of the line, and then he slammed down the phone, and he said, "Cocktail party for sharecroppers." [Laughter] Cursing. It was Martha Dodd on the other line. You know, she was the woman he said goodbye to in Of Time and the River, you know, The Berlin Station. And she was trying to inveigle him into coming to this fundraiser for sharecroppers. I will never forget that. "Cocktail party for sharecroppers."

JE: He just had no interest in that kind of stuff as far as you could see?

GS: I don't know. He wanted very much to be accepted, and yet you see this ambivalence in him all the time. He was too honest to play along, so it was that constant pulling and chopping.

JE: Two other people quickly, I would like to just mention and see if you have any acquaintance with them. One is W.J. Cash and the other would be James Agee.

GS: I knew nothing of W.J. Cash, never met him. I knew nothing of Agee. I've only known Father Fly who lived right across the street from me, but never knew Agee.

JE: So, skipping back a little bit to the Southern Conference for Human Welfare in November, '38, you went down from New York for the express purpose of writing a piece for the Survey Graphic.

GS: Not only.

JE: I mean, you were an assignment?

GS: That's right. I was interested. Lord, I was interested, partly because of this magazine we were planning, partly because the people who were going to be there, and I'd met, you see, a number of these people while I was in Chapel Hill. So for all those reasons, and, of course, I'm sure that Kellogg thought it would be a great thing for me to do.

JE: Well, the piece you wrote begins with sort of, a rather blase expression on your part of what you expected. You looked up your old friends, fellow students, who had been interested in things you'd been interested in from Chapel Hill and, I presume, other places as well, and that you were taking bets on how much

of the old stuff you were going to hear. These old guys, these old, sort of pseudo-liberals in a way, who were making all of these pronouncements. But you say, "We were wrong. The speakers all assumed we all knew the problems of the South and directed their talk to solutions." And here you toss in some names, people you call miracle men of the new South--Buck Kester, Tex McIntire, Joe Gelders. I'm not sure who McIntire is, I should know, but Hester, of course, was head of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union, and Joe Gillers was the young Jewish man from Birmingham, who had really been probably the most pivotal instigator of the whole southern conference. The story that Virginia Durr tells about she and he talking to Eleanor Roosevelt, and through her to Franklin, and getting this whole thing lined up, is on record. Then you talk about Frank Graham in the piece, and you express obvious admiration for Frank Graham here, as you do now fifty years later. So I come back to Graham and ask--you know, I find myself in this project separating out whites from blacks in terms of their perceptions of the problem of race in the South. And I keep finding blacks who, in 1939, '40, '41, right on through, were saying very clearly, "Segregation is the problem. That's what we've got to deal with." I find practically no whites who do that. Finally, Lillian Smith does in about '44. Will Alexander does at about the same time. I don't know when Frank Graham ever publicly said that segregation is the real problem that we've got to address. Most of the liberal whites of this time came about it in a very oblique way. They said we've got to make separate equal. We've

got to live within the law. We've changed these customs, but it's going to take time and so forth. Where did you see Graham on that spectrum?

GS: Well, Graham was, I think, if you look at the minutes of the Southern Conference, you will find some kind of statement about the policies that we would never meet again at a place where there had to be segregation.

JE: But, you see, that's a different thing than saying we're going to desegregate the other institutions of the society.

GS: Oh, absolutely.

JE: In point of fact, it was after this date, I think, that Pauli Murray could not get into the University of North Carolina.

GS: That's right, yes.

JE: And Frank Graham never was able to say to Pauli Murray, I'll go to bat for you because this law needs to be changed.

GS: The way you put it, you say that he couldn't do it, but I wonder if she ever asked him to?

JE: Yes, she did. She says in her autobiography that she carried on a correspondence with him that said, you know, "You have this reputation as being a great liberal. You know this is wrong. Why don't you address this?" And he wrote her back a very labored and heartfelt letter, saying, you know, "I do agree with you, and I see this down the road, but I just think it would be destructive now to try to do it."

GS: So he's saying, some day but not now.

JE: Yeah. And he's saying as for you now, what I can do is try to help you get in Howard, get in, you know, Michigan, get

in, you know, anywhere but here, as the saying goes. He wasn't ready.

GS: Okay, but this is a rather important thing that he was saying, it's not strategic right now, but he accepted the idea.

JE: I think basically he did. My hunch is that he did.

GS: Here is an important thing about the Southern Conference saying we're not going to meet again. Just the fact that we say we're not going to meet, expect where we can meet together, was a public declaration that there was something wrong with segregation, by all the whites. Don't under count it.

JE: Yeah.

GS: Because I remember one of the things that came out of my experience in the Myrdal study--and I remember writing specifically about this, and I just hope I can find it in all that mass of manuscript I have--was that, you know, here I was a young guy who came around and talked to people, and finally, we'd talk about race. I found it no real problem, once I'd talked to people about elections, and about the town, and about everything else, we'd talk about race. And I found that most southerners were eager to talk about race on a one-to-one basis, and so many times I found them saying, "You know, son, in two hundred we're all going to be cafe au lait," or something like that.

JE: Or say, "If it was just up to me, now. . ."

GS: Well, I didn't hear them say that so much, but I never got two of them to say that together. They wouldn't say it in front of another southerner. So I knew that this was a bad conscience, but it didn't--I thought when I first heard it, boy,

there are going to be big changes in twenty years. And then I realized they said something very different if I was interviewing them together or in an open office or something. I remember remarking in my notes to [Ralph] Bunche about this, a very different thing.

JE: Here's the conclusion I've come to about the Southern Conference. There were a lot of people there who meant well, who in their hearts would have been perfectly willing to go ahead and take segregation out, take the whole Jim Crow structure out of the society, but there was almost nobody there who wanted to make an issue of that. Even though they passed this resolution saying that the next time they would meet where they could all meet together, they turned right around and elected all their delegates to the permanent organization without one single black person in there, and not until somebody got up and said, "Hey, guys, this is what it's all about," did they go back through and put them in. And furthermore, so far I have looked in vain for any public statement from Dombrowski, from Foreman, from Aubrey Williams, or from Frank Graham, prior to 1943 or '44 or '45. . .

GS: That's interesting.

JE: . . .that said, "Here's where the problem is."

GS: Let's see if I can get at the reasoning for that, or the excuse. The assumption was, I think, that our economic problems were the root of all the evil. Once we can get economic opportunities for all poor people, than we can get to those other problems, but that is the overwhelming thing. That was maybe the rationale, the excuse, whatever. And also, even though I

traveled through the South for six months working for the Myrdal study and asked people questions that you would think I was going to get into trouble for asking, I never felt a threat. The only time I ever felt fear in the South was when I felt that my racial attitudes were being challenged by people around me--in a filling station, at a stop on the road. I did something, or I picked up a black person in my car. That's when the adrenalin started pumping.

JE: Well, are you saying that it did because of the way you felt, or it did because of some response that you literally perceived?

GS: I suspect it was mostly my own perception, my own fears.

JE: Inside yourself?

GS: I'm sure. Oh, I could justify it by other things, but I'm sure it was that. I was never called down for it. No, it was that built-in fear.

JE: It's what we were talking about yesterday, having this sense that you don't want to embarrass someone else. That the structure tells you, you have it deeply ingrained in you that you shouldn't do certain things, taboos, and so forth. Well, the reason I linger over all this so much is, again, that one of the conclusions that I have come to about whites and blacks both in this period, late '30s, early '40s, is that whatever they would say to you, either then or now, about what they knew to be the problem, they did know that race was a problem that sooner or later was going to have to be dealt with. They knew it. They

might have said to you, they may say to you to this very day, "I just didn't realize. I never knew how bad it was." But they did know because they read the paper, they saw that people were lynched, they read the papers, they saw the New Deal, they saw people talking all around this issue. And somehow I find it really just impossible to believe intellectually that anybody who was politically conscious and socially--oriented, liberal, conservative or whatever--anybody who had that kind of perception, would not have known, deep in their gut, that sooner or later they were going to have to face this issue and work it out one way or the other.

GS: Now, talking about our fears. Lillian Smith, of course, gets to the heart of that very quickly.

JE: Very quickly, very quickly.

GS: I never realized that it was that close, but the black laughter behind my back used to--boy, I didn't know how white I was until I used to hear that. Then I remember reading Native Son, and, boy, did that wake me up. Wow! And I realized that none of Paul Green's plays had prepared me for this. None of all the liberal literature I'd been reading, none of that prepared me for that.

JE: I believe Paul Green took Native Son to the stage.

GS: He did, oh yes, oh heavens yes.

JE: In like '43 or something like that?

GS: Oh yes. Paul Green was way ahead me, in his earlier work, you see. I was intellectually and emotionally about where he was when he wrote The New Wagon. I think that's the title of

that short story, where you had a noble, hard working black put down by and embarrassed by these terrible whites.

JE: And left you to draw your own conclusions.

GS: But Native Son's well beyond it. [Laughter]

JE: Right. But people had to see, didn't they? Or is that my hindsight that tells me they had to know?

GS: I certainly didn't anticipate, even after I did all the Myrdal study and so forth, I didn't anticipate anything like the changes that would come about so peacefully, relatively peacefully, and with so relatively little opposition from whites.

JE: You mean what happened after '54?

GS: Oh yes. I was absolutely amazed.

JE: Okay, well then I think I know what your answer will be to this. If I were to say to you that looking back now on the period 1945 to 1950, between the end of World War II and, say, the elections of 1950 when Graham lost, Claude Pepper lost, McCarthy was in his ascendancy and so forth, in that five period, it now appears to me that the South had its last chance to fix its own social wagon voluntarily.

GS: The white south?

JE: The white South. And it could not bring itself to do it. Therefore, we went through a twenty-five year period of transformation that was often violent and bloody and all the rest in order to get there. Now is that another hindsight?

GS: I don't think that whatever our attitudes would have been in '45 to '50 we could have escaped the civil rights movement.

JE: In other words, you don't think it is humanly possible for the white south to have had the progressive presence of mind to do what needed to be done?

GS: I think the blacks had to do it for themselves. The beauty of the civil rights movement was that it came out of the black churches. It came primarily out of the South.

JE: That and the federal courts?

GS: Oh yes, sure.

JE: It took those two elements.

GS: And they had to do it for themselves. If we had done it for them, in the first place we couldn't have done it for them, but if we had, they wouldn't have been in anything like the strength, position.

JE: If that's true. . . .

GS: Because, you see, when they did it for themselves, we had to recognize that they had this leadership. See, if we had been doing it, we would have said, "Okay, we did it." You see, let me tell you about it: The educated blacks we saw were also always inferior in our view. I remember going to Tuskegee when I was working for Farm Security Administration. We had a meeting there. There were black people reporting and white reporting. I was rather appalled by conditions around, and I remember saying something about that to George Mitchell a couple of years later. He nodded and he said, "Well, let me tell you something that Dr. Will Alexander said." Somebody had gone over to Tuskegee and came back saying, "Dr. Will, Tuskegee isn't what it used to be."

And Dr. Will said, "Well, it never was. It was always a third, fourth rate institution." And that's what I saw.

JE: Okay, but George, how would you account for somebody like Charles Johnson or Walter White or Thurgood Marshall or any of the people who. . . . You go back and look at the late '30s and what they were saying and what they were doing at that time, they were telling us the situation and, indeed, the federal court, starting in 1938, was also.

GS: And you see, I was getting to know those people when I was at the Henry Street settlement when I was in the North. And I was reading the New Republic and reading The Nation, and I knew their philosophy, but that was very different from having it applied in the South. And I was nervous, I can remember being nervous about the enforcement of integrating the schools when we were just beginning to get good money for black schools [laughter].

JE: Okay.

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE B

START OF TAPE 2, SIDE B

(SIDE A of this tape is an interview with Grace Hamilton)

GS: She was [Grace Hamilton] the first person to teach me about the true equality of blacks or [laughter] superiority of blacks. Marvelous woman.

JE: Yeah, she's a lady. I saw her just a month ago.

GS: But you see, I'm afraid to say in the '50s, even though I'd been through Myrdal study and all this kind of thing, my instinctive reaction was to measure the intellectual quality of blacks by how much like us they were beginning to me. How they pronounced their words.

JE: That was what we often meant by integration.

GS: Expect for their music, I couldn't understand. Different culture. I learned as much as they did about black can be beautiful. The whole afro business was an education to me too, and I needed that. Isn't that a shock?

JE: No, it's not. That doesn't surprise me. It's just how it was, and that's all you can say. But really, if you're saying that it took the black uprising and the court turn-around in combination, i.e., it took the civil rights movement, to bring us to where we are, with all of its inadequacies and all the rest, then you have to be saying that even though you know that there were blacks and there were court decisions as early as the late '30s who were saying exactly what Martin Luther King and U.S. Supreme Court said in '54. Was it just that there weren't enough of them? They couldn't make as much of an impact? We were not ready to listen, or why was it that it took fifteen more years?

GS: Well, we thought--I shouldn't say this, I think a great many southerners thought--that "Those people. . . . In the first place, they aren't really all black. They've got a lot of white in them." I'm going to be really mean. "They've got a lot of white in them, and they want to be white, and this is one of the ways they want to get accepted, to be white. They're talking about more blacks like themselves up north. They don't understand what we've got down here, which is almost a different race."

JE: So this, in effect, was a way that white liberals could more or less dismiss all that?

GS: No white liberal would say that. But I suspect that I wasn't the only white liberal who was really thinking it down under neath. You see what I mean?

JE: I do, indeed. Okay, quickly back to the Southern Conference, just to clear up one or two things. There's the story about Eleanor Roosevelt integrating the meeting. There's at least a dozen versions of that story in print. Do you have any recollection personally of that event?

GS: What I wrote in the Survey is a better recollection than I possibly have. I remember seeing her at the meeting, but I don't remember the church meeting.

JE: You said, "Even when smaller sessions were removed to a church, separation was demanded, and Mrs. Franklin D. Roosevelt had to change her place when she inadvertently sat on the wrong side." And that's literally a true statement. That's an accurate account of what did happen. That's a far cry from most

of the other versions which said it was in the Municipal Auditorium and she drew a chalk line during the middle of the floor and made her set her chair right on the line.

GS: But I don't remember the event. My strongest memory, and this, again, is so personally revealing, of the event is Mrs. Roosevelt standing in a profile silhouette with Mary McCleod Bethune and my wish that she could have found a more presentable black to make as her favorite.

JE: Because Mrs. Bethune was a gross figure?

GS: She was gross [laughter]. She was very black. She was all those kinds of things that Grace Hamilton is not, you see [laughter]. That's why I saw it's so revealing of me as a southerner, you see.

JE: Okay, let me ask you quickly about just some names of people. Just to see if you can tell me if you recall seeing these people there. McGill?

GS: I don't remember Ralph McGill there, no. Was he there?

JE: No, he wasn't. Howard Odum?

GS: I don't remember Odum there, no.

JE: He was not either. Virginius Dabney or Jonathan Daniels?

GS: I don't remember either one of them being there.

JE: I don't believe either of them were. Ellis Arnall?

GS: Wasn't he supposed to be on the program?

JE: It seems to be he was. I still have a question mark by his name.

GS: I don't know that he was actually there, but I think he was on the program.

JE: Will Alexander?

GS: He was definitely there.

JE: He was there?

GS: I'm almost certain he was there. If he was there, he'd certainly be one of the speakers.

JE: Okay.

GS: The people I remember are Mrs. Charlton. I remember her hat, and she was very much in charge there. Donald Comer.

JE: Yeah, the industrialist.

GS: He made a great presence there. He and Mrs. Roosevelt, I remember seeing them very. . . .

JE: Seems to me she went to his house to have dinner or something.

GS: No doubt. Of course, he was a great friend of her husband's, and I'm sure she was returning a political favor.

JE: Yeah. Lillian Smith?

GS: I don't remember Lillian there.

JE: She wasn't there. Guy Johnson?

GS: I don't remember him there.

JE: I don't think he was either. H.C. Nixon, did you know him?

GS: I did, and I think he was there.

JE: Yes, and he became the executive secretary.

GS: I'm pretty sure, yeah, he was there.

JE: John Temple Graves, did you know him?

GS: I knew John Temple Graves. I don't think he was there. From Chapel Hill?

JE: No, this was a newspaper columnist from Birmingham.

GS: Sorry, I'm thinking of Louis Graves in Chapel Hill. John Temple Graves, I think, was there.

JE: Yeah, he was on the program. In fact, he introduced Graham or Black or somebody.

GS: By the way, the Birmingham press accounts, as I recall them, were pretty full and good.

JE: They were. I've read all of that stuff, and I mean, they treated this like this was a big deal.

GS: Well, I remember, you see, two years later when I was working with all these newspaper men, I found them very open to my Farm Security stuff.

JE: See, this is the thing.

GS: Every single newspaper, I found open to me.

JE: I want to get on that point in just a minute. Vann Woodard? Did you know him then?

GS: I met him later.

JE: He was there.

GS: I met him, I think the first time, in '45 or something like that, with Josephine Wilkins.

JE: He was there, and I want to talk to him because he was a young professor at the University of Florida then. Arthur Raper was there. Lucy Mason was there.

GS: Oh yes, and I knew both of them very well later. I knew Arthur Raper then. I knew Lucy Mason later.

JE: George Mitchell was there. Myles Horton was there. Do you remember seeing any of them there?

GS: Oh, I'd met Myles before, you see, at Highlander, two summers before, and I remember him speaking from the floor. He got caught in that whole, you know, communist fight. Certainly, I remember him.

JE: Maury Maverick?

GS: Maury Maverick was there and spoke.

JE: Yeah, he was on the program.

GS: And was a terrific speaker.

JE: Was a little guy with maybe a physical handicap or something?

GS: He was about 5'5" and he kind of bristled. He looked like, funny. . . .

JE: He had a funny appearance.

GS: Like the cartoons of Alexander Woolcott [laughter].

JE: He was a real fireball.

GS: Oh, he made one of those populist-Texas speeches that was very powerful. Oh, and he said something about, is there a transcript of his speech?

JE: There may be. So far I haven't, I'm going to have get some help from the University of Wisconsin on that.

GS: Okay, because I think if you look at his speech, you'll find some direct reference to race. Because Maury Maverick was one of the earliest people to be more outspoken on that.

JE: Okay, good, that's helpful. I'll check for that.

GS: But I could be wrong.

JE: Howard Kester, you mentioned. Did you know Howard?

GS: I didn't, no.

JE: H.L. Mitchell?

GS: Yeah.

JE: Was he there?

GS: So far as I know. I'm almost certain he was because I think both of these guys had, you know, small delegations with them.

JE: Donald Comer was there. Myrdal was there.

GS: I didn't know that.

JE: Yes, he was.

GS: Of course, I didn't know who Myrdal was at the time.

JE: Myrdal was there.

GS: God, I didn't know he was on the job that early.

JE: Dombrowski?

GS: Yes, I knew Dombrowski.

JE: Lister Hill was there.

GS: Yeah. And of course, I knew Durr. Virginia Durr was there.

JE: Benjamin Mays? Any of the blacks?

GS: Benjamin Mays was there, yes, Dr. Mays from Atlanta. And also, wasn't Horace Mann Bond there?

JE: Horace Mann Bond was there, and, let's see, who else. Rufus Clement, Charles S. Johnson, F. D. Patterson from Tuskegee.

GS: They were all there. That's right.

JE: It started on Sunday. The first thing that happened was Frank Graham's keynote address in the auditorium on Sunday night. Do you remember hearing him?

GS: I remember Graham speaking but I can't remember whether it was that time or later.

JE: Well, it's possible it could have been him presiding at something later, but that was his speech, it was the keynote address. It was in the auditorium. There were three or four thousand people there, and it was at that meeting that everybody sat together. Do you have any recollection at that?

GS: No. Isn't that terrible? I'm sorry.

JE: Yeah, I really wish somebody could--Mrs. Durr helped me some. She talked a little bit about it and gave a little of the feeling about it.

GS: She was so much a part of the organization, you see. It's funny, I can't even remember how I got there. I certainly didn't fly down [laughter].

JE: No, you probably went on the train.

GS: Could have been.

JE: Mrs. Roosevelt came on the train. She got there on Tuesday morning. She had been in Atlanta in the day before, and all over the Atlanta papers, berating the censors in Atlanta for refusing to let them put Tobacco Road, movies or stage, I forget which it was. She got there in the morning on Tuesday and stayed until midnight. She did not spend the night there. When she made her speech, see if you can remember this, same auditorium. It seats about six or seven thousand people.

GS: A big, big, oh, it's a great big place, yeah.

JE: Maybe a thousand or two or even three on the floor, and then this horseshoe with people up there. They filled it all up. They had them sticking on the street, and she went outside the auditorium before her speech and went out on the street and said, "I'm so sorry you can't get it to hear me talk, and I wanted you to know how much I appreciate you coming." None of that rings a bell?

GS: No, no.

JE: Then she made a speech, and one of the thing she said in her speech was--this was after the incident, the seating incident, after the police, and Bull Conner was already the police commissioner. After all of that, her speech, and she said in her speech, "We have to honor the local laws and customs." What she said was not what you might expect her to have said. Now, we have this image of her, you know, really tough on race and all of that, and outspoken in many ways she was, but she did not choose this occasion to reinforce the resolution, and say segregation, you know, shouldn't happen in a gathering of this kind. She said, "We have to obey the laws and customs where we find them."

GS: Now, that was reinforced, I suspect, by a long history of the fight against lynching, in which the whole idea was justice--you don't need to take action because justice will do it for you.

JE: And in point of fact, at this very meeting, I think at the session where the seating incident happened, they were having

a discussion of the federal antilynching law. And that morning, in the morning paper that day, there was a report of a lynching in Mississippi, a gruesome lynching. The Congressman from this Birmingham district, his name was Patrick, I believe, was saying, "We don't want a federal law. If you're not going to include all the gangsters in Chicago in this, then we're not going to this." And Mrs. Roosevelt got up and took him to task, and she really hammered him hard. And all that was in the paper. So I'm not suggesting that she was less than. . . .

GS: No, but I think maybe that was the reason for a lot of us.

JE: I think it probably was.

GS: Was that, okay, here we're fighting this lynching business. We're fighting insurrection. We're fighting people of the Ku Klux Klan, people taking the law into their own hands. We're saying, "Whatever the laws are, we have to live up to them, and it's our job to change the laws if we don't like them, but we have to do that peacefully." So that was the rationale for it.

JE: Okay, I think that's about all I need to talk to you about the Southern Conference.

GS: But my feeling, my remembrance of the thing, was dominated by the big union delegations.

JE: Yeah, you talk about that in your piece, and the fact that this was really a true cross-section. The industrialists were there. The union people were there, and all in between, and yet, the industrialists really didn't say very much. You call them to task. All they were interested in were the freight

rates. I mean, this piece really holds up beautifully, George. I doubt I could pull out anything I've written twenty years ago and feel as good about it.

GS: I'm relieved [laughter].

JE: Really. I mean, I'm serious. Okay, let me get on to the Myrdal stuff. You left Birmingham and went back to New York.

GS: Went back to my job at Henry Street settlement.

JE: January, '39. Tell me what was the length of your tenure with the Myrdal study and how did you get into that.

GS: I was working at the Henry Street settlement. I was also writing these articles for the Survey Graphic. I did the thing about the poll tax. I did the feature article, God knows, they gave me all kinds of space--as a young kid [laughter], I didn't appreciate it, my God--in that magazine. The thing about "No Room in Green Pastures," about the changes in the black ( ) belt of Alabama, you know, from cotton to grass, and what it was doing in terms of people and all of that. As well as some smaller assignments for the Survey Monthly. Then Myrdal must have come to Henry Street. Funny, I bet he did, and I don't remember it. But how I got onto the Myrdal study was that I had done these articles on the poll tax, and that evidently drew their attention to me. I was asked to come up to the office that they had in, I think, the Chrysler Building. They interviewed me, and told me about Bunche, and asked me if I'd like to do this. I saw it was a chance to travel, and also they could only pay me a limited amount of money. But there was a woman called Eleanor Bonticue who had a grant from somewhere to do a study of

the poll tax. So she and Bunche had gotten together to share my time because the questions Bunche wanted me to answer were also ones that Bonticue wanted answered. So they can of figured out what they wanted me to do. I forget what I was to be paid. Nobody ever asked me if I knew how to do social research. I'd only had this journalistic training [laughter]. I didn't know how to take notes decently. I knew nothing about that, and they didn't seem to be worried about that. They'd just seen my pieces, I guess. But the thing that worried me more than anything else was that I was getting an allowance of \$300 for a car, and I was expected to travel by road, and I didn't know how to drive.

JE: You couldn't drive at all?

GS: My family had never had a car, and I'd only had one experience driving, literally one experience, when I was coming back from Chapel Hill one early morning, about three o'clock in the morning, in a Model T, and the driver was going to sleep. So he finally put me in the driver's seat and showed be exactly how to keep it going until we choked going up a hill, getting into Winston-Salem. I thank God, [laughter] because I wouldn't have known what to do otherwise. I didn't know how to shift gears.

[Interruption]

There was an allotment for a car, and I didn't know how to drive a car. So I took a couple of driving lessons in New York.

JE: Hell of a place to learn.

GS: Then went to Washington. Went down to get my license, and it was snowing.

JE: So this was still winter of '39?

GS: No, it was January of '40.

JE: Okay, so the whole year of '39 you were in New York writing and working at the settlement house.

GS: Except when I came south to take that trip to see about South and to do field work for the Southern Conference of Human Welfare.

JE: Oh yeah, we didn't really talk about that. Who asked you to do that?

GS: Clark Foreman.

JE: And did you do that for a while?

GS: You see, I went to see Clark about South, my magazine, and I told him I was going to go down and see what kind of support we could get. And he suggested then that the Southern Conference could help pay some of traveling expenses and give me a list of people to see. So I took on that job, and traveled, and saw a lot of people, asking them about Southern Conference, and wrote him back reports, very frank, very flip a bit, I guess. But the same kind of reports I wrote for Bunche. And he was amused by them, and he duplicated them--I don't know how he did it, typed them out or whatever--and circulated them among people in Washington. Well, those got out of hand, and the next year, when I was traveling for the Myrdal study, right in the middle of that, a magazine, very conservative magazine, put out by the Alabama State Highway Commission, or something like that, republished one of my letters, including one that I will never forget, which said, so and so and so and so, "Use him. We may

need money." [Laughter] I remember seeing it for the first time. I saw it when I was waiting to see a probate judge, because it was a magazine that all these guys took. I found it and froze, and I put the magazine down. And then I kept seeing it in the offices of other people I would go to interview. Nobody ever mentioned it.

JE: Nobody ever connected you.

GS: Never connected me [laughter]. Now, it would be fascinating to find that magazine, and see [laughter] what I said. But obviously, they thought that this was an expose, you see, of the whole thinking of this radical, screwball crowd.

JE: All right, so you did that bit of traveling.

GS: That's right. I went all the way to Texas, by the way.

JE: And then in January of '40 this other, Myrdal thing came up. So when did you go to work for them?

GS: Immediately, about a week afterwards. I went to Washington, met with Bunch. I can only recall two meetings with him. I sat Eleanor Bonticue and she briefed me. Virginia Durr met me when I first came in. I remember that very vividly. She had me out to her house, and I met some other people. I met Tex Goldsmith. I met Jack Fischer, who was later editor of Harper's. He was Farm Security. I didn't know he was going to be my boss. I met Dr. Will. I saw some of those people. Then I went out on the road.

JE: For how long?

GS: Until July.

JE: For five months.

GS: That's right. Until I got hired by Farm Security Administration.

JE: Where did you go for Myrdal?

GS: I think there were fifteen counties.

JE: In what states?

GS: Tennessee, Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi.

JE: And the book that Dewey Grantham edited, is it all of the Bunche part of the Myrdal study?

GS: No, it's very different. Bunche wrote his monographs, and I don't know how many he did, and Myrdal took those and digested those and got the ideas from them. So the text of Bunche's monographs is very different from the text, not in terms of ideas but in terms of expressions and details and so forth, than in American Dilemma.

JE: And different also from the work that the field people did themselves?

GS: Yes, but there are big hunks of that book that are from my field notes.

JE: Really?

GS: Oh yes. In some places, it says all the quotes not acknowledged are from Stoney's field notes [laughter].

JE: I see. Was anyone else doing this besides you?

GS: There were three others, and I wasn't aware of any of them. I didn't know until Grantham told me that there were three others, but there were three others.

JE: Are they identified in that book?

GS: They're identified as well, yes. But I didn't know anything about that. I started off, by the way, in Chattanooga. That was the first place I stopped, and I worked out my technique of research there. Just stumbled on it.

JE: I don't want this to sound critical at all because you know what I'm doing and you know I ask dumb questions sometimes. But I find myself thinking that you knew far more about what the South was really like than ninety-nine and a half percent of all the white people from Maryland to Texas, because you were out there in a variety of capacities, seeing for yourself what it was like.

GS: Sure.

JE: And yet you say that, even as late as '54, you found it hard to really see integration as a viable, fairly immediate consequence of. . . .

GS: I could see integration for people who could join our lifestyle. I couldn't see integration with just any black. That was the problem, you see. I just couldn't see it happening.

JE: I guess what I'm asking you, if you couldn't see it, then there's really no way in the world that the other people who hadn't had your experiences could see it.

GS: I think you're right, sure.

JE: No way.

GS: Yeah, yeah.

JE: So in a sense it's a measure of our disease, if you will, that what the social structure did to us was it made us unable to see.

GS: I mean, the fascinating thing is how much I realize in looking back, when I was making my film about the midwives and went down to Albany. I spent from September to December traveling around with Mrs. Mary Coley.

JE: What year was that?

GS: This was in '52. Then we shot it in '53, I think it was. I think I'm right about that. No, no, sorry, it was '51 and we shot it in '52. The fall of '51. I traveled daily with Miss Mary. I lived in the white hotel, and I knew the importance of protecting her by not getting too familiar and so forth. We got to be bosom buddies. We talked about so, so many things, but there were two things we never talked about. One was race, and the other was sex. And yet we were dealing with that all the time with midwives.

JE: All the time, with everything you were doing.

GS: There was just a gentlemen's agreement. We didn't talk about that. We would both have been embarrassed by it [laughter]. And I didn't realize that so forcefully until recently I read a marvelous book, called Mother Wit, an oral history with a black midwife. About a third of the book is about race relations and a good bit about sex there. It was so frank-- That was released last year--it was so frank that I assumed that the woman who took down the notes and arranged it must have been black. She wasn't. She was white. But it was a woman. But I think that is a measure of the change of the times. That black midwife felt comfortable. She was very much like Miss Mary. She felt comfortable is talking about race and sex with this woman,

white woman. I knew that had to do all kinds of things to guard against the danger that would put us in. For example, when Miss Mary--I saw her and I wanted to test out her voice, how it was going to record. Would we understand her if we used her on the track. You know, was her accent--by that time I could understand every word she was saying, but could other people. And then we didn't have tape recorders at the time, you see, so I had to go up to a recording studio. The only recording studio in the town was at the local radio station, which was on the balcony of the white hotel. Now how was I going to get her up there? I talked to the manager. He said, "Well, if she drives up, and she parks in the back, and she comes after big check out time,"--so it's in the middle of the morning--"and the bellhop can meet her. He can bring her across the lobby and she can walk up the stairs to the balcony." And I said, "Thank you, sir." [Laughter] Can you imagine it? And I said, "Thank you, sir."

JE: Okay, what about '41? What happened to you after you left that Myrdal project in the summer of '40?

GS: I got hired by the Farm Security Administration as a Associate Regional Information Director, and I worked there, starting, I think, my first was July 1, 1940, and I worked until I went into the army in January, 1942.

JE: Worked out of Washington?

GS: No, no, worked out of Montgomery, Alabama.

JE: The whole time you were based there?

GS: Yeah, it was the southern region. So it was Alabama, Georgia, Florida, South Carolina.

JE: Was that when Aubrey Williams?

GS: No, Aubrey Williams was with NYA. He wasn't with Farm Security. I knew Aubrey. He spoke at the Southern Conference, didn't he?

JE: Yeah, he did. What did you think of him?

GS: I was a little uneasy with him because he seemed to be so anxious to make remarks that would slightly shock people so they would look at him.

JE: He seemed a little bit too far left to you?

GS: I thought he was kind of show-off. I didn't quite trust him. I don't know, I have no reasons other than just an instinctive feeling.

JE: Did Foreman strike you that way, too?

GS: Oh, Foreman, well, I told you what he did about those damn letters. Foreman, I felt, was always a show-off. I don't share any real admiration for him.

JE: What about Dombrowski?

GS: Well, let me finish about Foreman. Foreman constantly would brag about the fact that he had a black secretary. You know, "Okay, you've got a black secretary," but he'd bring it up at every possible time. And he would bustle around and do this and that. And I felt abused by him and used by him, and was afraid of him, too, because I didn't think he was the kind of cautious fellow we needed for this. And of course, I was revealing [laughter] by own insecurities when I tell you this.

JE: What about Dombrowski?

GS: Dombrowskii, I didn't know very well. He was always quiet, very gentlemanly. I never understood why he became such a lightning rod of left-right. . . .

JE: He was not a bombastic man?

GS: Nothing like that.

JE: Very gentle.

GS: I never knew him. And also I couldn't see why people had such respect for him. I don't mean that he wasn't to be respected, but he didn't speak with any particular brilliance. I didn't think his reasoning was all that, you know, special. I couldn't see why he was so special. Obviously, a great many people loved him. Myles was my guy [laughter]. And the difference between the two is amazing.

JE: Did you ever think of Myles as being sort of far enough to the left that it made you uneasy?

[Interruption]

GS: Yeah, you asked me about Myles. The funny thing is that because of Myles personality, his ability to joke, ability to speak simple, folksy language, I always knew he could take care of himself [laughter].

JE: He didn't seem like a threatening sort of person?

GS: No, whatever his radical ideas, he put them in such terms and with such good humor and so forth, that we could all accept him.

JE: Okay, now, we've named several people here--Horton, Dombrowski, Foreman, Williams. I could add Lillian Smith and

maybe Will Alexander and one or two others. These are sort of the white vanguard, if you will, of liberalism in the South.

GS: Yeah, that's right.

JE: Can you single out anybody in that group or others I haven't named whom you thought of as being dangerously left-wing, communist maybe, somehow with ulterior motives that would threaten the peace and safety. . . .

GS: Funny, I never thought that Foreman was dangerously left. I just thought he was impolitic and irresponsible.

JE: Not too careful about. . . .

GS: I thought he was a rich young guy who was uncertain of himself because he hadn't made his living the way his family made its living, you know. And I resented that because he wore his family connections on his sleeve, you know, that kind of thing.

JE: Even though, was it his father or his uncle who owned the newspaper, the Atlanta Constitution, and was very conservative?

GS: Oh sure, but he was Clark Howard Foreman, you see. Well, now, wasn't Myles doing the same thing in his own way, but it was very, very different. [Laughter]

JE: So nobody, really, out of that period--you never felt yourself worried about the movement drifting too far to the left and getting captured. . . .

GS: Well, we were all worried that we would get red baited.

JE: Baited, but I'm not talking about what others would say, I'm talking about what you feared might happen, that it really might be taken over.

GS: No.

JE: That wasn't the worry?

GS: No. Though, understand me, I was not naive about the communist party because I'd spent time in the lower east side, and I'd watched our organizations at the settlement house, infiltrated by the communists, and if they didn't take it over, they'd wreck it. Over and over again. Even a mother's club.

JE: So did this make you feel that you needed to warn people that that kind of stuff might happen?

GS: I didn't feel it was happening in the South.

JE: It just wasn't even. . . .

GS: But my God, the Workers Alliance, I remember the Organization of Unemployed that met at Henry Street settlement, and there was a huge socialist local and a communist local and, of course, everybody on the street had a different political agenda. You didn't walk through Union Square without somebody grabbing your lapel and saying, "What's your program for France?"

JE: That's really aggressive politics. There was nothing like that in the South?

GS: Nothing. The Lovestonites--but this was all New York.

JE: What about on the right in the South? Did you think of that as being aggressive, dangerous, threatening? We talked earlier about the Columbians and the Brown Shirts and all that.

GS: Yeah, well, I didn't know anything about those. At that time I knew nothing about those. I just knew the Ku Klux Klan, and we were, of course, all against the Ku Klux Klan. What we were worried about was the southern demigogues--Bilbo, Cotton

Ed Smith, Talmadge, all those terrible, foul mouthed people who could constantly rile up the hillbillies and all those awful people to vote against all our good New Deal ideas.

JE: Okay, maybe this is the best place for me then to ask you: They finally succeeded at that, didn't they? Those very people, Bilbo, Talmadge, Eastland, all those people, ten years later in 1950, '51, '52, they finally won this ideological struggle among white people. Gentlemen's struggle, don't call it ideological, it never got to that. It was a gentlemen's battle over what direction the South was going to go, and you were part of a group of people who wanted to go in a certain direction, and these people, they wanted to keep going backward.

GS: And remember, by that time I had cast my lot with the North. I was married. I had a family. While I had made films in the South. . . .

JE: You were not really here in. . . .

GS: That's right. I had ambitions to, we'd long since stopped thinking about the magazine, but I wanted to make a feature out of a Paul Green novel, and I came down to talk to people in North Carolina about that. Some people started a film board in North Carolina. I should have come down to take it over. My marriage was in trouble, and I didn't dare do it. I should have done it [laughter]. It would have been better for both my marriage and the. . . . It [the Film Board] wouldn't have died the way it did, because we put the wrong person in. But I wasn't so clearly identified with the South. I'd made a certain reputation. I was getting assignments, or I was getting

contracts in the North. I had just bought a house in New Rochelle, and then I had a divorce and so forth.

JE: If you were in Montgomery until you went into the service, then you were in the service from '42 until when?

GS: '42 until January, '46.

JE: So you were in the service for four years?

GS: That's right. I came out in January, '46, and supposed to go, you know, you were supposed to get your job back. But by that time, Farm Security had shrunk, so that there was no job for me there. So the federal government gave me a job as an information person for federal public housing in Atlanta. So I moved into Atlanta. Moved in with George Mitchell and was waiting for my wife to come over.

JE: You had married when?

GS: Married in England in '45, the summer of '45. My wife came over in April [1946], and we had the apartment in George Mitchell's house all set up for her, and I was obviously very much preoccupied with that. But I found was quickly that my boss in federal public housing really didn't believe in public housing [laughter]. I was writing, trying to get stuff in the newspapers. He didn't want to get stuff in the newspapers. He didn't want me to do my job. I was still writing some odd magazine articles. Then Josephine Wilkins and Maggie Fisher suggested that I work for Helen Douglas Mankin because she was running for reelection. You know she'd won. . . .

JE: Right, she'd won the first time.

GS: But she had to run also immediately. So I took over as her campaign manager.

JE: And she lost.

GS: And she lost. Well, we won by 41,000 votes, and she lost by the county unit votes.

JE: Is that right?

GS: Oh yes.

JE: She had a plurality?

GS: You see, Fulton County had a 125,000 registered voters and six unit votes. DeKalb County had 41,000 registered voters and six unit votes. Rockdale had 1,800 registered voters and two unit votes. Judge James C. Davis, backed by the Stone Mountain Klan, won a plurality in DeKalb and Rockdale. We won by, I think it was, these stories always exaggerate themselves. . . .

JE: An overwhelming number.

GS: An overwhelming, certainly 20,000 over, and we lost the election by the county unit system. Then we protested. We started a write-in campaign and all this kind of thing. I worked for Helen until the general election where, even though we got a lot of write-ins, it didn't. Then Nick Reed, who had started this cooperative film unit in Athens, suggested that I might write some scripts because I'd worked for the Farm Security Administration and he had some contracts with agricultural agencies for films. So he asked me to come over as a script writer.

JE: To Athens, Georgia?

GS: I lived in Atlanta, however, with the Mitchells and traveled to Athens, traveled to locations, until George Mitchell helped me get a Rosenwald fellowship.

JE: And that's when you went to Greece?

GS: No, I went to England. What happened was that after my wife got here, she was, even though Mitchell knew Oxford and he was a Rhodes scholar, and when she walked in her father's college crest was on the door [laughter] and all this kind of business, we did everything possible to make her feel at ease, she was unhappy. And I thought, well, maybe if I could just get back for a year, I can find out if I can possibly make a living in England. And he helped me get the Rosenwald fellowship.

JE: That was when?

GS: I got it in '46, but I didn't take it up until about a year later, because, by that time, by the time it came through, I was up to my neck in film projects.

JE: Had found your niche?

GS: Well, I was enthusiastic about it. And we seemed to be getting along better and all those kinds of things. So I didn't take it up until March of '48. Maybe I didn't get it until early '47. Anyway, I didn't take it up until March, '48 when I went to the National Film Board of Canada for a month, traveled with their field people. Then Mary and I went to England and we came back in March of '49. I was in Athens, and I directed my first film that summer, and we left for Washington in January of '50.

JE: To do what?

GS: To do a film for George Washington University Hospital, sponsored through the Association of American Medical Colleges. A fellow who ran that part of the association had been a friend and a fellow at CDC, David Rue.

JE: Did you stay in Washington?

GS: Stayed in Washington until '56.

JE: Working on films?

GS: That's right, though I traveled out of there. Nick Reed and I . . . .

END OF TAPE 2, SIDE B