

Interview number A-0379 in the Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4007)
at The Southern Historical Collection, The Louis Round Wilson Special Collections
Library, UNC-Chapel Hill.

A-379

Interview

with

JAMES A. GRAHAM

February 22, 1995

by Howard E. Covington, Jr.

and

Marion A. Ellis

Indexed by Howard E. Covington, Jr.

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

~~Original transcript on deposit at~~
~~The Southern Historical Collection~~
~~Louis Round Wilson Library~~

Citation of this interview should be as follows:
"Southern Oral History Program,
in the Southern Historical Collection Manuscripts Department,
Wilson Library,
The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill"

Copyright © 1996 The University of North Carolina

TAPE LOG

INTERVIEWERS: Howard E. Covington, Jr.
and Marion A. Ellis

TAPE NO.: 2.22.95-JG

INTERVIEWEE: James A. Graham

MONO () STEREO (X) NO. OF SIDES: 2

NO. OF TAPES: 1

INTERVIEW DATE: 2/22/95

LOCATION: At the office of James A. Graham, N.C. Commissioner of Agriculture, Raleigh, N.C.

TOPIC: An oral history of James A. Graham of Raleigh, N.C., North Carolina's Commissioner of Agriculture since July 30, 1964. This interview covers his life and career as vocational education high school teacher, manager of a fair, director of statewide Hereford owners organization, manager of Raleigh farmers' market and finally state commissioner of agriculture for more than 30 years. It also includes his comments on governors and other political figures during his time and his comments on the changing political scene in North Carolina from the 1940s to the 1990s.

COMMENTS: Only text in quotation marks is verbatim: all other text is summarized, including the interviewers' questions.

TAPE INDEX

Counter

No.

Topic

(Side A)

001 Tapes opens without introduction. Without prompting, Graham began relating his career beginning with operation of Upper Mountain Research Station in Laurel Springs, N.C.

010 He becomes director of the Dixie Classic Fair in Winston-Salem; then first full-time director of N.C. Hereford Association, traveling all over the state.

034 When Terry Sanford ran for governor in 1960, Graham supported him, but didn't get to know him until he became head of Farmers' Market in Raleigh. Talked with Sanford in Greensboro about running against incumbent Agriculture Commissioner L.Y. Ballentine.

060 In 1960, when he was thinking about running for Commissioner of Agriculture, he had a campaign budget in mind of \$10,000. When Bob Scott decided to run for lieutenant governor, it opened way for Graham. Graham was picked by Sanford to succeed Ballentine after Ballentine died in office.

091 Explanation of purpose of interview and background of Southern Oral History Program (belated introduction)

104 Graham was born April 7, 1921, and raised on a farm in Cleveland in Rowan County. He still owns part of the farm where he raises cattle. He wanted to be Commissioner of Agriculture from the time he was a child and witnessed visit of agriculture commissioner to his community.

136 He was teaching agriculture in vocational education program at high school in Iredell County when he saw Kerr Scott again, who was then Commissioner of Agriculture. Was invited to Scott homeplace when Scott announced for governor but didn't understand what the invitation was about and did not go.

157 He was offered job as director of new N.C. Department of Agriculture test farm in the mountains at Laurel Springs. Background on development of mountain research farms. "My grades were terrible but I was president of my class." (State College, 1942). He didn't want to take the job, but Kerr Scott said go on up there, so he did.

183 He describes Kerr Scott, who was master of the Grange, as a "rugged individualist" who would do what he said he would do. Said he would like to bring him back. "Change began right then when Kerr Scott went in as governor of North Carolina."

204 Ben Roney was the brains behind Scott's organization; Terry Sanford in the Kerr Scott campaign. Scott described Sanford as "clean as a hound's tooth. He doesn't have a scar on him."

217 Describes change during administration of Kerr Scott. "We were part of what they called the Branch-head Boys." Kerr Scott's election broke up the so-called Shelby Dynasty.

224 Scott pushed for passage of bond issue to pay for farm-to-market roads.

237 Terry Sanford appointed him Commissioner of Agriculture. Sanford was master at political things and was ahead of his time. Looks back at efforts to convert tobacco farmers to other crops and diversification of farming.

255 Under Terry Sanford, the state developed Farmers' Market in Raleigh and state got serious about agricultural marketing. Sanford was familiar with farming because of his background in Scotland County.

290 Kerr Scott liked Terry Sanford because of his political savvy. Admires Sanford's book on state government, his work on education, and "courageous attitude to go against the odds. How many people had the guts to put a sales tax on food for education." Believes Sanford was ahead of change. Said there are three kinds of people: people who watch things happen, those who watch what happened and those that wonder what happen.

327 Describes how Kerr Scott became agriculture commissioner, his assistant Dave Coltrane succeeded him for less than a year, then L. Y. "Stag" Ballentine was elected and died in office. Sanford appointed Graham on July

30, 1964, and helped him get on the ballot for the November election to the full four-year term. "I've won eight times ever since."

344 Describes his job and history of Farmers Market in Raleigh. Took the job when Luther Hodges was governor. Sanford supported changes in market operation.

380 Describes the 1960 campaign for governor with candidates I. Beverly Lake, John Larkins, Malcolm Seawell, Terry Sanford. Larkins believed he would win because "he had all the sheriff's with him." Said he had never seen attorney general (Seawell was A.G.) become governor.

392 Had support in his campaign from Beverly Lake.

401 Believes Sanford's support came from people in education. He had an "impeccable" war record. He was "man on the go." Tribute to Sanford follows. Believes that Sanford's transition from governor to president of Duke University was a "miracle."

435 Discussion about role of Democratic Party in producing young candidates and how contenders studied people in party to succeed later on.

444 Discussion of East-West tradition in North Carolina politics for election of U.S. senators. Scott broke that up. Sanford used his own connections and Scott's from N.C. State to build his own organization.

475 "Sanford will go down and history will record him as one of the great, great, truly great North Carolinians." Especially in education. Believes he contributed to marketing of North Carolina products and diversification of farming.

483 Describes state's agriculture diversification. Anecdote about smell of paper mill in mountains. Companion (name is garbled) told him, "Young man don't ask too many questions. That's green dollar bills we smell."

493 Describes events leading up to the 1960 Democratic Convention. Luther Hodges was a favorite son candidate. Sanford supported John Kennedy. Believes this was example of Sanford's political shrewdness. Sanford also is a worker.

508 Sanford helped get Hodges get appointed U.S. Secretary of Commerce. That shows Sanford was working for what was best for state.

515 Description of Democratic Party in North Carolina. Dan Moore was last of the governors put in by Shelby Dynasty. Sanford was backing Rich Preyer.

525 Graham remained friendly with Sanford and Lake. Said he got his father to vote for Preyer when he knew Preyer wouldn't win. Believes in staying with party and those in the party that you owe your allegiance to. "That's another thing I learned from Kerr Scott: You plow out to the end of the row."

537 Description of change in Democratic Party. Due in part to new people moving into state.

540 Diminished influence of agriculture is of concern. "You can't very well eat those (computer) chips." Concerned about environmental issues. "I'm worried about the water, but I am concerned about the food." Food, he says, is essential to learning.

556 Description of involvement with Jimmy Carter. Believes South can elect a president but he can't govern when he gets there. Believes Sanford would make good president. Believes Sanford lost his presidential bid because of timing and health issues.

573 Describes Dan Moore's governorship. Believes Moore was a good governor. "State went to a status quo," under Moore. Says he is worried about current cuts.

585 Believes he is conservative Democrat who is liberal enough to recognize the needs of people.

593 Believes he was "watched" by more conservative crowd after Sanford left office. Describes N.C. Secretary of State Thad Eure and Edwin Gill who was from Laurinburg as Sanford was. Gill later admitted he was wrong on opposing farm-to-market roads.

End of Side A.

Beginning of Side B

001 Describes controversy over gift of governor's chair and flag to Sanford as outgoing governor. Council of State opposed it. Graham arranged to pay for it. Feelings were strong against Sanford.

030 Describes of race relations in 1960s. David Coltrane made contribution as head of Good Neighbor Council.

048 Describes Luther Hodges appointing him to board at N.C. A&T College; gives extensive background on his role in finding new presidents, including Dr. Samuel Proctor and Dr. Lewis Dowdy.

080 Recollection of day he got call from Hodges who asked him to go on board of N.C. A&T College. Runs through names of others on board: George Sockwell, Dr. Davis, "a man named Rick from other here in Durham," mayor of Greensboro. Appointed to search committee.

112 Lewis Dowdy, the man college wanted, did not have doctorate. Said Hodges told he was dragging his feet to get president. Went to president of Tuskegee. He turned it down.

129 Candidates turned it down because of "unrest." He was trying to encourage people that North Carolina was moving forward. Believed that his work with A&T had ruined his chances to be commissioner of agriculture. Agriculture people turned against Proctor because he was a "religious man."

150 Dan Moore reappointed him to board. Said blacks had "faith" in him. Dowdy became president after he earned his doctorate.

166 Says N.C. was a leader in race relations in the South because of Sanford. He was friends with black leaders John Larkin, Dave Morehead and Murray Davis. Dowdy made a great president.

191 Discussion of his position in early 1960s. "I found myself very uncomfortable" during time of demonstrations in downtown Greensboro. Began to feel that his involvement with A&T was going to jeopardize his political future. He did not want blacks opposing him and did not want to be known by whites as too close to blacks.

208 Says race is still a factor in 1995. "The eastern North Carolina white Democrat is no more." (Talking off the record)

219 (Asked that recorder be cut off. It remained on.)

231 Sanford could survive the racial problems.

235 Says Sanford couldn't pass along his popularity to anyone else like Richardson Preyer and his wife, Emily.

243 Not sure how he survived racial politics of that period.

250 Says he has written lots of letters (in anger) and torn them up the next day; has written only one letter to the editor and that was to the *News & Observer*, which published it last week.

258 Says he learned a lot from watching Sanford. "He calculates moves." Said he promised Sanford he would be best appointment that Sanford ever made. Says he has won eight times in a row and led the ticket five times; he calls or writes Sanford every July 30 to thank him for appointing him, regardless of where he is in the world. Once called from Japan.

286 Description of differences between council of state under Republican and Democratic governors. Lapses into description of current Republican promises. Issue of term limits takes up some time. Compares his long-term service to other states where his counterparts are changing.

310 Describes James Holshouser as a good governor. Met with him day after election and says Holshouser did not believe he would win election.

326 Says legislature is getting more and more powerful. Describes Dan Moore, Bob Scott, Holshouser and Jim Hunt. Wonders if state is getting to "revolving door" of Republicans and Democrats.

356 Says he still has "fire left in my belly" and isn't ready to quit. Reflects on his life in the mountains where he worked with both Republicans and Democrats. This helped shape his politics. "I love my job." Says when that stops he will quit.

400 Sanford has had a balanced career. Believes Sanford's health problems hurt him in 1992. Says race may have had something to do with Lauch Faircloth's victory over Sanford in 1992.

406 Saw that Sanford was in trouble in 1992. Had seen problems for last two elections, but did not believe it was as strong as it was. Was hearing anti-Sanford, anti-government, fed-up with Democrats.

421 Further discussion of why voters were unhappy with Sanford. No one thing, but cumulation of "lot of things." Believes race was factor, "tired of Jesse Jackson."

435 Discussion of problems within Democratic Party. Believes Bill Clinton would have a tough time now.

444 Says Jim Martin was "different kind of Republican." He got it by "element of surprise." Can't compare the Sanford-Moore factions to today. Recalled failure of Lacy Thornburg to win governorship.

460 Concludes interview.

End of Tape.