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Interview  
with  
GUY B. JOHNSON

July 22, 1990

By John Egerton  
Transcribed by Jovita Flynn

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The Southern Oral History Program  
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START OF TAPE 1, SIDE B

July 22 and 23, 1990

(Side A of this interview is with Charles Jones)

JOHN EGERTON: I know that you were living in Chapel Hill when you first went to Atlanta to take the SRC job. Would you give me a little bit of your background, personal background? How you got to Chapel Hill, where your home was and so forth?

GUY B. JOHNSON: Yes, I was born in Texas about 45 miles northeast to Dallas in 1901. I'll soon be 90 if I live that long.

JE: What was the name of the town?

GJ: The little town was called Caddo Mills, named for the Caddo Indians. It was settled by southern people almost entirely. I had two grandfathers and a great-grandfather who were pioneers.

JE: In Texas?

GJ: A North Carolina grandfather, for instance, went there in 1856. My great-grandfather went actually during the closing year of the Lone Star Republic, '44, I believe. They settled in a rich, black soil area, which was already sort of open prairie country. It was easy to get into cultivation. This was excellent soil, and they raised cotton, corn, wheat, oats, and some other things, but the main cash crop was cotton.

JE: Were both of your grandfathers from there? I mean, they both cultivated that land?

GJ: Yes. They were both from plantation families, one from Alabama, one from North Carolina, and had experience on the farm.

They also had some other skills. In fact, you almost had to have several if you were going to survive in those days [laughter]. So the North Carolina grandfather was a preacher, a teacher or tutor, a farmer, and then, of course, like most of them he could do leather work, to keep the harness in repair, and maybe work on wagons and buggies. Because you simply had to have some of those skills.

JE: So you were a third generation Texan?

GJ: Yes.

JE: In that sense, that your grandfathers both migrated there from the South. That's amazing.

GJ: Both in 1856, my great-grandfather in '44. Incidentally, I was a third cousin of Lyndon Johnson. His grandfather and my grandfather were first cousins. I never met him. My oldest brother knew him because he had some interest in local politics, but I never had the pleasure of meeting Lyndon except seeing him make speeches. We lived in a small town. I guess it had something like 300 people, a farming village. It had had the MK&T Railroad since the early 1880s, which gave them easy access to cities in Oklahoma, St. Louis, Chicago, etc., and greatly added to the possibility of marketing farm products. So I'd say it was a fairly prosperous little community. I don't know of anybody who was really poor, and only two or three people that you might consider fairly well off, not rich at all.

JE: Yeoman farmers?

GJ: Yes. There were practically no blacks in that community. I remember maybe one family. We did use some black

labor sometimes during the cotton picking season. Somebody who had a truck--and trucks were not very big in those days--would organize black cotton picking teams in the county seat of Greenville, which was eight miles away. He'd drive them down to Caddo Mills and put them out picking cotton for various farmers. A good picker could do pretty well because, as I recall, it was a dollar a hundred pounds. I knew one of two of those fellows who could pick 400 pounds a day.

JE: How in the world did you get from that isolated rural community all the way back over here to Chapel Hill?

GJ: Well, that's a bit of a story. I did quite well in high school, and then two years at a little junior college at Greenville, our county seat. Had quite an impulse to go on and get more education. So I managed to get a scholarship to Baylor University. I'd been brought up a Baptist, and my father's father was one of the founders of the Baptist church there. My father, during all my young life, was the choir leader and one of the school's superintendents at the Baptist church. So I went to Baylor and did all right there. I changed my career ambitions from being a minister to being a teacher. Looking back on it, I can see now that I had made the decision to do pre-ministerial work at Baylor and then go to Fort Worth Seminary because I probably thought it was the surest way of being able to get a little help, you know, tuition and so forth, to stay in Baylor. Well, the Baptists were doing then what they're doing now. You know, they're shooting themselves in the foot. The Bible Department especially was always under attack by old J. Frank

Norris, a Baptist conservative minister from Fort Worth. Well, I also found that my Bible courses were not terribly interesting and were taught by men whom I would now consider rather bigoted. Although I was brought up in a rather conservative atmosphere, I guess, my father was a broadminded man and had a pretty good education himself. He had gone to Baylor for a while. Both grandfathers had some higher education, and they had small libraries, but interesting libraries. It did not escape my notice [laughter] that they had books like, oh, one or two things by Thomas Jefferson, I think they had Darwin, Origin of the Species, and they certainly had, oh, who was the early astronomer who wrote Celestial Mechanics and stuff like that?

JE: Oh yeah, I can't call his name.

GJ: So, I mean, these are not the libraries of bigoted [laughter] people. Well, this came to be a little more than I could take, and at the same time, I was trying out a course in sociology, which was brand new then. I became much interested in the sociology. A storm was brewing from this preacher, Frank Norris at Fort Worth, who was beginning to attack my sociology teacher for being not a literalist, you know, when it came to the Bible. Well, to shorten this, I finished there in '21, and a teacher helped get me a tuition scholarship at the University of Chicago. He had studied there. This was the coming place, you know, in the middle west. Everybody was talking about Chicago and what a fine place it was. I think was founded only about 1895.

JE: Yeah, it was not an old school, but it was in its heyday then.

GJ: So I went there, and by this time I had completely decided to be a teacher and not a preacher. I always thought that was a very wise decision. Well, after the masters degree there under Park and Farris, Smalls.

JE: Robert Park was sort of the preeminent sociologist at that time, wasn't he?

GJ: Yes, he was. He had a special interest in race and ethnic groups.

JE: What was his background? Did he have any southern ties?

GJ: No, oh wait, yes. Not family but, most people don't know this and I don't think I ever heard him mention it, he became sort of a personal secretary to Booker Washington, and worked there at Tuskskege for several years. I strongly suspect that some of Washington's best speeches were drafted by Robert E. Park. I would suspect especially those famous lines in the 1895, what was it, Cotton States Exhibition Speech about the fingers.

JE: Five fingers of the hand.

GJ: Although, of course, Washington was quite capable of doing all that himself. Well, anyway, he had had experience as a newspaper man. I forget whether it was New England or in the West. Then he had had this experience at Tuskegee. I forget just where he got his training in sociology, if any.

JE: Maybe he invented it [laughter]?

GJ: Well, I liked him very much. He liked my work and was very encouraging to me.

JE: How long did you stay there?

GJ: I was just there that one year. Nobody told me, you know, that you don't get a masters so easily in one year, especially if you're from a substandard high school background. Dean Smalls looked over my credits and decided that I should have had more history. So he wanted me to take on the side a course in English Constitutional History [Laughter] taught by Terry. I took it, and I profited by it very much. I got in that course, especially in the readings, I did a pretty good sweep of the making of modern England.

JE: Did you finish the master's?

GJ: Yes, I did.

JE: In one year?

GJ: One year, and I took two extra courses. Smalls wanted me to have another course in something. Oh, it was taught by-- well, I had two courses over there--Mrs. Breckinridge and another one by Edith. . . . See, my memory is now beginning to play tricks on me. Edith Abbott, social statistics. So instead of the usual eight or nine courses, plus thesis, I had ten courses and wrote my thesis on the resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan in the postwar period. Got it all typed and submitted in time for graduation.

JE: Got the degree, gosh, in the twelve months.

GJ: Before I went there, I would worry considerably about this farm village boy from Texas with a weak high school

background and probably mediocre AB background, going up there and competing with these upper Midwest, urban types.

JE: You must have done all right.

GJ: I went up there in an open air ceremony, just the social sciences, and Smalls was also Dean of the Graduate School. He called my name and I went up, and he twinkled his eyes, "Congratulations." He spoke in that Latin thing where they award the degree, and I felt like I had done pretty well.

JE: I imagine you did.

GJ: Well, and then the problem was getting a job. I won't get into the details, but it was a narrow escape. I worked at a big, wealthy Jewish country club, Idlewile, out south of Chicago, where you had people like the Fleishmans and Marx and Shafuers and Bartzes, and Libby, and....

JE: That was the only job you could get?

GJ: That was it. I use to read want-ads and go to these meetings where they wanted applicants to come and listen to a spiel, you know. I soon got used to these and saw that they were all wanting you to travel the Middle West and send encyclopedias or Bibles or whatnot.

JE: Was a degree in sociology just not a tradable commodity?

GJ: The market was very low that year for some reason, I don't know.

JE: How long was it before you could get a teaching job?

GJ: Oh, I got it right at the end of the summer. Oh, I had interviews. I well remember at the close of two of these

interviews, one from Southern Illinois and the other from Earlham College, the presidents of these colleges, they were there interviewing, and they said the same things to me, "Mr. Johnson, we like your record. You've got good recommendations from your professors, but you look entirely too young for us. You'll overcome that in time, but right now we think we just have to look for somebody who's a little more mature looking." Oh, I tell you, I was really in a bind. I didn't know what I was going to do with August coming on and no job. I guess I could have stayed on at the country club, but that was like your room and meals and \$30.00 a month. Very pleasant because you got very fine food.

JE: But you did land a job that fall?

GJ: Yes, Bruce Melvin of Ohio Wesleyan called me from downtown Chicago. Said he'd tried to catch up with me, but he learned that I was working out in the suburbs. He was frantic to find somebody to be an instructor in sociology. He said, "Now, I've never laid eyes on you, and I'm not going to have time to run out there or for you to run downtown, but I'll tell you: I'm impressed by your recommendations. Your professors all think well of you. So I'm going to make you an offer, sight unseen." And he did, and I took it right there. [Laughter] Well, I went out there in a couple of weeks. It was that close to fall term.

JE: This was in '22?

GJ: '22, and started teaching sociology. And boy, I worked hard. I mean, I had to bone up and get lectures and discussions things arranged for three courses. I had help from my teacher at

Baylor occasionally. In fact, in my senior year I was his teaching assistant. Thank God for that experience.

JE: How long did you stay at Ohio Wesleyan?

GJ: One year.

JE: Just one year.

GJ: Yes, I had a stroke of luck. I was engaged to this girl from Greenville, Texas [Guion Griffis]. We had met at junior college, fell in love, and she was taking some work at the School of Journalism, University of Missouri, getting ready to set up a Department of Journalism at Baylor Women's College. She had borrowed money. I had borrowed money from the local bank with the help of my eldest brother who was cashier. I tell you, my career really hinges on some close calls. I don't know how I would ever have borrowed any money unless he had been in that bank. Well, I think I owed \$800.00, and my wife owed about that much, I mean, my fiance. I went off to Texas that summer in '22 [1923], very pessimistic. I tried to get some kind of job there in Ohio but nothing doing. I needed something that was going to make me solvent and a married man, really. So I went to Texas and stayed with my oldest brother. When my fiance came up--it was getting, I guess, about the end of summer school at Baylor Women's College, this would have been in August--and she bore a very important message. That the head of social science at Baylor College had had a tragedy in the family and he was all shaken up and felt that he had to resign and get himself together. So the Dean wanted her to tell me and ask me if I might be interested in taking that place [laughter]. It would

pay \$2,900. At Ohio Wesleyan I was getting \$1,600. I was about to be raised, if I went back, to \$1,800. And my wife was head of the Journalism Department, and she was making, oh, I think, \$2,600 or \$2,700. So suddenly here we were faced with riches, you know, [laughter] provided we'd get married, and nobody had to push us on that. So we got out the wedding invitations and married on September 3. Had a short honeymoon in the Ozarks and then went down there and started teaching. [Interruption]

I said we were lucky where we were. I was already very lucky, but it happens that at Chicago, I roomed for part of the year with a boy from Georgia, named Wiley Sanders. Wiley had studied at Emory under Dr. Howard Odum, and in 1920 Odum got invited to come to Chapel Hill, and he did, September, 1920. He set up the Department of Sociology, the School of Social Work. He wanted Wiley to come on up here with him and be, I think, a teaching fellow, and do graduate work. So he had been here that year, '20-'21. '21-'22, while I was at Chicago, he came there to work toward a doctorate in Social Service Administration.

JE: Wiley did?

GJ: Wiley B. Sanders. He kept talking to me about Howard Odum, what a dynamic, ambitious man this way, and how he was going to build up social science at Chapel Hill. And also, Odum was getting ready to start a sociology journal, The Journal of Social Forces. He was planning to do that in '22, which it was already '22, of course. Wiley was very much interested in this thesis I was writing. He read some of it and he liked it. He kept saying to me, "Look, Odum will have this new journal going

pretty soon. Why don't you write him up an article of this Ku Klux business because I know he'll be interested in that sort of thing because he's very interested in race relations." Well, when I went to Ohio Wesleyan that fall, I kept looking out for signs of this new journal in the library, and I finally spotted it, and I was quite impressed. I said I believe I'll do what Wiley suggested. So I sat down and in a very short time I wrote a paper on "The New Ku Klux Klan, a Sociological Interpretation." Well, I had a very nice letter from Odum. He liked it very much and wanted to use it. He put it in the next issue. So that began our correspondence, you see.

JE: While you were at Wesleyan?

GJ: Yes. Then I went back to Texas and got married and started teaching at Baylor College for Women. Let's see, this gets us into the spring of '24. I had a letter from Odum which said--all this must have been quite early in '24--he simply asked me if I wouldn't like to write him another article. Oh, I accepted although I wasn't quite sure what I was going to write about. I told him I'd come up with something soon. So I wrote him a paper on the northward migration of the Negro and its consequences. He liked that, too, and he published that a little later. Then in the spring he wrote me a special letter. Said, "I've been trying for some time to get financing from private foundations for an Institute for Research in Social Science, and I think the money's almost in hand, and that we'll be able in about a week to make an announcement. But in the meantime, I want you to know that if this comes through, as I fully expect,

you're going to be the first person I invite to join it." I wrote him back that yes, I always had planned to do more graduate work, and this was a marvelous opportunity, but there was one hitch. My wife was also a professional, holding a good job, earning about the same amount I was, and she was going to be very loath to give that up and not know what she'd face up here. He wrote right back and said they'll offer her an assistantship also.

JE: Was this '25 by then?

GJ: Still spring of '24. So we thought it over and accepted. Well, if you knew what most fellowships and scholarships were in those days, you'll see this was really a big offer. A tuition scholarship was usually like \$750. There might have been a few as much as \$1,000, but very few. The fellowship where you had work responsibilities in return, like I did at Chicago, well, they worked my tail off. You might get \$1,500. Well, Odum's were \$1,500 each. Oh, I should have said usually university fellowships were \$1,000. So Odum was offering us each \$1,500. So although this would mean quite a comedown in our total salary, it was very good.

JE: And a chance to get your doctorates, both of you.

GJ: Both of us. So we drove up here in an old Model T Ford in 1924, and we've been here ever since. My wife [Guion] died a year ago. She and Odum didn't operate on the same wave length. He was too wordy and vague to suit her. Very hard for her to pin him down on her dissertation project which she wanted, since she was in journalism, he wanted to call the press as a social force.

She wanted to know, "Well, what is a social force? How are you going to measure this?" [Laughter] She finally moved over to history and wrote her dissertation on antebellum North Carolina, in which she made extensive use of the press as a source, just one of the sources, for writing a social history. A real contribution. She opened up some new vistas in the field of social history. She had some training in sociology, some courses, so she knew something about social demography, social stratification, and so on. When she showed Dr. Conner, who was head of the history department and her director, the prospectus of her dissertation, oh, he just hit the ceiling. He said, "What is this chapter here you want in on social classes in North Carolina? There are not any social classes in North Carolina."

JE: This was the chairman of the history department?

GJ: Yeah. Imagine that. He said, "Oh well, you might say black and white, but what other classes did you have?" Well, she tried to tell him a few of them [laughter]. He didn't like it, but he admired her very much. Oh, let's see, there were other things that she had in there, great details on the life of a slave. So he just sort of turned her loose, and she went on. She wrote about half the chapters which later made up Antebellum North Carolina. Then after she got her degree, kept working on it for several years, doubled the size of it, and finally got out that book in '37.

JE: When did she get the degree and when did you get yours?

GJ: We got our degrees in '27. We had been here three years then. I guess we'd actually worked on the degrees about

two and a half years. So that's the story of, almost a Horatio Alger story of these strokes of good luck, like getting a job at Ohio Wesleyan, getting a job in Texas ( ), getting married, and knowing about Odum through Wiley Sanders, and then getting in on the Institute.

JE: And once you got here and into the Institute, starting really in '24, but as an assistant professor, I suppose, in '27 after you got your degree.

GJ: Well, an associate professor.

JE: And you just stayed in that capacity, that role, all the way through the '30s?

GJ: Right.

JE: So for a period of 15 to 20 years, you were living the life of an academic, teaching, doing research, and writing.

GJ: Yes. Specializing in race relations and making a special effort to get acquainted with black leaders wherever I could, all over the country. I soon knew the president of every black college in the state, not every, I should say every state institution, and some of the others. I knew black lawyers, teachers, businessmen, like Spaulding of Durham, who was president of North Carolina Mutual. Then I would go to meetings around the country and make a point of getting acquainted with the black leadership.

JE: Okay, while we're on the '30s and before we move into the '40s, did you go to the meeting of the Southern Conference for Human Welfare in Birmingham in '38?

GJ: No, I did not. Well, let's see, to put it bluntly, the youngster or youngsters who came around, talking about this and getting people lined up for the meeting, did not even see Howard Odum. They didn't see me.

JE: Who were these people?

GJ: One was Clark Foreman.

JE: Aubrey Williams? H.C. Nixon?

GJ: Well, I don't think either. Maybe it was just Foreman.

JE: Just Foreman?

GJ: Yes. I knew him just slightly. Then news stories began to come out about planning this meeting. Mrs. Roosevelt was going to participate, and several big names. Odum was a little miffed: "Here I've been working all these years, and it's being proposed that we ought to have a big organization in the South to start getting some popular support for progress. I've got this department and this institute, and we've written books, and now these kids come along and they're not interested in my work."

JE: Well, if I could interject a question here, he or somebody got Frank Graham to do the keynote address down there, and Graham was very visible in that organization, right from the beginning.

GJ: Yes. I think Odum felt that these Southern Conference people maybe looked on him [Odum] as a, you know, non-activist type, just purely study, scholarship and all that, and felt that he wouldn't do them much good. Whereas, Graham was anything but

that. He was a public figure. He liked to go and make speeches and get something moving.

JE: Did the two of them get along all right, Graham and Odum?

GJ: They had some rather frequent friction. They were both devoted to. . . .

JE: What, at a distance, looked like the same cause. . .

GJ: Right. Both devoted to the cause of a better South. But, well, the truth is Frank was one of the world's worst administrators. He was sloppy, careless, and would often make decisions that were not the best for a particular problem. Well, I'll cite you one or two examples. There had been an opening as chairman of the physics department for a couple of years, and there was some fractionalism in the department. Members couldn't agree on supporting any one person. Frank was getting a little impatient about this, but what he should have done was call these people in and say, "Look, I want you to get together on a recommendation within, you know, one month. Let me have it, or I am going to take actions of my own." But he didn't do that. He happened to be off on a trip, and at Union Station in Washington he met a young physicist. I forget where he was from, but like Pittsburgh or something. They both had late trains and had time to kill, and they got to talking and walking out toward the Capitol and all around that area. So when he found that this young man was a physicist, he said, "You know, you may be just what we need at Chapel Hill." [Laughter] And he wound up offering the man the head of the physics department right then

and there. He got home and told them about it, and, well, there was a good deal of dismay. They thought this bird was--he's not mature. He's not a distinguished scholar. So I'll tell you, he had a rough time, and wound up sort of wasting time. He wound up after about four or five years, just resigning and getting out of it.

JE: And you cite that as what you think of as a typical example of Graham's administrative sloppiness?

GJ: Yeah. Well, I had an experience with him in anthropology which was, in some ways, even more interesting. See, Odum had two Ph.D.'s, one in sociology and one in psychology. Sociology was the second one. He got that at Columbia under Giddings and had one or two courses under Boaz, the great anthropologist. He liked anthropology and always said it was a natural ally with sociology, and we ought to put in some anthropology work. Well, three years after I got my Ph.D., I put in a course in social anthropology. Odum had talked to Graham and they agreed. "Yes, go ahead. Build up anthropology courses within sociology, and then someday it might get to be big enough that we can separate them. But you go ahead." Then a few years later I put in a second course. So we had that beginning under the department of sociology. Well, came the Depression and the WPA projects, and a young archaeologist in the state--who had just come here as an undergraduate student mind you--he had managed to get acquainted with practically every archaeologist in the country. Had a voluminous correspondence with them and had done a lot of field work and was really probably as good an

archaeologist as a lot of those professors were. Well, he got the papers together for a big WPA project to do an Indian mound down in Union County, called Town Creek Mound. The government approved it with one proviso. Said, "you don't have a qualified archaeologist there on the staff at UNC. So before we can actually put this thing into effect, you're going to have to lay hands on somebody who can qualify and supervise this project." So there they were stymied. Again, Graham was at Union Station [laughter] in Washington, trying to get home, and he got into conversation with a young man who was just finishing his degree in archaeology at Harvard. And found out he was the son of a man that Graham had known. He was a South Carolina man who Graham had known for quite a while. Well, the same story again. Graham told him about this crisis with the project. Said, "Maybe you're the man we need. Would you be interested?" He said, yes, he would. So they worked out some details, and Graham, without remembering that we already had some anthropology and that we were committed to building it up in sociology and then separating it, he told this young man, [Robert] Wauchope, "Yes, you come on. You supervise this dig, and you can have a free hand. You build up a whole department of anthropology if you wish."

JE: Wreacking havoc on the established order here.

GJ: Well, that's what happened in the long run. I tried gently to tell Wauchope about complications, but, well, he was just a young idealist fellow. This didn't mean a thing to him at all. Graham had said so and so, and that was it. Well, by the end of the year, students were asking Wauchope, "What happened to

the grades in anthropology so and so?" He said, "Well, I turned them in in due course. They're all there." They said, "Well, we haven't received any yet." And the same thing then the next quarter. And the registrar ( ) gently at Graham, "Do we have a Department of Anthropology or don't we? I have no record from the faculty minutes"-- I think he's the one that kept the faculty minutes--"that such a department had been created. Until that happens, we don't really have one. What am I going to do with these grades that are stacking up here? That's when Graham got busy and he appointed a committee. He made me chairman [laughter]. Well, we wound up, you know, recommending that--see, we didn't know how long this WPA thing would last. How long Wauchope might be here. But we knew sociology had been here quite a while--this was in 1940--and that Wauchope's new courses were to be included underneath the sociology department. The title of the department would be changed to sociology and anthropology, and you would have a) courses in sociology, and b) courses in anthropology, which seemed like a fair, sensible arrangement. We had just got all this ironed out when Wauchope got another offer, which was what he really wanted. He was really trained in middle-American archaeology.

JE: So he left you in the lurch?

GJ: And he hadn't done a damn thing for this project. He turned it over to the student who did all the supervising. But WPA was satisfied. So he suddenly got this offer to be head of the Middle-American Institute in Tulane. [Laughter]

JE: So he left you.

GJ: Just what he wanted, and that's where he filled out his career.

JE: I'm going to take a break at this point, just for a second here.

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE B

START OF TAPE 2, SIDE A

(Side B of this tape is an interview with John Hope Franklin)

JOHN EGERTON: Prior to the time that you went to Atlanta to be the first executive director of the Southern Regional Council in 1944, there had been some preliminary efforts, first by a group of black leaders meeting in Durham.

GUY JOHNSON: Yeah, issued the Durham Statement.

JE: Right, and then the white leaders meeting in Atlanta, and then a joint meeting in Richmond. Did you attend any of those meetings?

GJ: No.

JE: You weren't involved in any of that?

GJ: These were rather small groups--oh, well, not actually very small, but sort of the top leadership, especially the elders like Odum and Alexander.

JE: When you first heard of these efforts, you, of course, were here in Chapel Hill teaching.

GJ: Yes.

JE: I assume it must have been Dr. Odum who told you about this and asked you if you'd be interested in that job.

GJ: Yes, in a way. 'Course, I had kept up with these things, and actually the Durham Statement and the Richmond Statement were published. Had some attention in the press. 'Course, as a result of the third meeting, which was in Atlanta, I believe.

JE: It was the other way around. It was Durham, and then Atlanta, and then Richmond.

GJ: Oh yeah, that's right.

JE: And on that point, the first two were widely publicized but the Richmond meeting got no publicity at all, and I wondered if you knew why.

GJ: Well, I suppose it was considered sort of an in-house thing to lay some actual plans. So they did that in '43, and during Christmas vacation Dr. Odum and Will Alexander--I started to say Dr. Charles Johnson, but that should be checked.

JE: Yeah, he was the author of the Durham Statement, Johnson was. He drafted that.

GJ: Anyway, I know it was Odum and Alexander who came into my office one morning. I happened to be up there working during the holidays. And they sort of laid this out to me. I judged that they were having trouble or going to have trouble getting somebody to head this thing up.

JE: They had been the two principal leaders of the Interracial Cooperation Agency in Atlanta, is that right?

GJ: Oh that, let's see. They had been, yes.

JE: Both of them had been quite active in that and Charles Johnson too. Especially Alexander.

GJ: Alexander, because he was head of the old Interracial Commission. So in effect they said, "Here we are now with this directive to get this thing going, and we've got to move in a hurry. You've just got to take this job."

JE: They really put the pressure on.

GJ: They did, yes. I told them I was not the administrative type. I was quite happy here in the academic

world. They said, "Well, you take it long enough to get this thing on its feet, and then see how you feel about it." Well, they finally prevailed on me and I accepted. In fact, I think I took the train to Atlanta on January 1, 1944.

JE: Is that right? Okay, the other day we spoke briefly about the relationship between Dr. Odum and Dr. Graham, and I noted that Dr. Odum had not been involved in the Southern Conference for Human Welfare but Dr. Graham was. Now, here's a new organization Dr. Odum's involved in and Dr. Graham is not. Is this just a coincidence or do you think there was any particular reason for it?

GJ: No, I don't think there was any special reason. 'Course, Odum was known to be very much interested in race and I think, well, probably he felt Graham's interest in that was sort of a sideline. Anyway, he was a very busy University president and you wouldn't expect him to take a very active part. So for whatever reason, I don't know. I don't think he was involved except as a friend and member, as I recall. Well, anyway, I don't think of any. . . .

JE: No significance to that. Some other people who were not involved, who had been involved in other efforts to bring about social change in one form or another, in the field of journalism Ralph McGill, though he was sort of a central figure in those early meetings, the Atlanta meeting and Richmond.

GJ: Right, right.

JE: He never actually joined SRC. Never was a member, never was active.

GJ: That's true. He was a good friend. We had personal contacts and he would give us some advice. He was supportive as an editor, but there were a number of people like that. They were willing to help but didn't want to have any obligations of membership and so forth.

JE: Was Jonathan Daniels one of those too?

GJ: He was almost completely standoffish. [Laughter]

JE: Yeah, he never had anything to do with SRC, did he?

GJ: He wouldn't have anything to do with things like this.

JE: Whereas, Virginius Dabney was very active.

GJ: Yes, Dabney.

JE: I'm curious about those three men, and sort of the contrast in their particular style as far as this organization is concerned.

GJ: I think they were all alike in one way, and that is that they were not going to stick their necks out very far and not get tagged as radicals. But they did differ in personal styles and how much they would cooperative. Now, Dabney soon lost interest in the Council, and I think this is because he felt that at times the Council was, oh, maybe a little too liberal for him. I couldn't prove that, but that was my feeling. Cause that was a common thing to happen among some of these people who were active in the beginning.

JE: You see that pattern, don't you?

GJ: Yes. I think some of this was due to what happened at the charter meeting. We had a lot of very frank discussion.

JE: That was in November of '44?

GJ: No, no, February of '44.

JE: Oh, the meeting to really form the organization.

GJ: Organize it, yes, and elect officers, etc.

JE: Had you already been chosen formally as the executive director?

GJ: Yes, well, they were authorized to select somebody. So at that charter meeting I was sort of pro forma. But they did have to straighten out some matters on policy and program and elect a board of directors, and then, of course, me, and a secretary-treasurer and what have you. Well, now, this was a good-sized meeting, and I don't know who had done the actual inviting of people, other than those who had taken part in the Durham and Atlanta meetings. But there were quite a number of prominent people, a few in business. I don't believe there was anybody in politics, but several editors.

JE: McGill was there at that meeting, I believe. He signed the charter at least.

GJ: Yeah, but he was not at this meeting.

JE: Already he had sort of made his exit by that time.

GJ: Well, I don't think he ever intended to give involved in the details of organization. He probably figured, well, today they're going to organize and it's not going to be very interesting. Well, I doubt if there are very many editors anyway who have the time to get out and spend a whole day at something extraneous. Well, now, let's see, there was a young man there who was from the sort of Negro Youth Congress, I believe that's what it was called. I knew some of those fellows, and I knew

they were left-wingers. Get a whole bunch of them in your organization and they're going to make it sort of hard on you. But somebody had seen to it that this young fellow was there. He didn't last very long, but he wanted some input into the policies that we were going to have.

JE: That was a wing of the Southern Conference for Human Welfare, if I'm not mistaken.

GJ: I think so, yes. Well, the big argument that day was over our policy toward segregation. Oh, I rather expected this all along, and there were a number of people who would be our future members and were already members of the Southern Conference, like [Clark] Foreman, [James] Dombrowski, and then some of their local leaders.

JE: Aubrey Williams?

GJ: I didn't meet Aubrey Williams for a while. He was pretty busy in the New Deal. So we got into a long discussion over segregation. My position was, look, I think all of us here, or practically everybody here, is against segregation, and to me it's just a tactical question of whether you want to begin by tagging the Southern Regional Council as a declared enemy of segregation. I said I can work with either approach, whatever it is. Well, I guess I didn't actually say much at the beginning of the meeting, but, I mean, Odum and Charles Johnson and a whole bunch of these black leaders knew what my stand would be. The upshot of this discussion was that some of the black leaders sort of turned the tide against beginning this organization with an open declaration of warfare on segregation. [Laughter] Carter

Wesley, for instance, editor of the Houston Informer, a very able man and, oh, semi-militant, and a supporter of the NAACP and all that. He said, in effect, there's lots of problems here. This is not the Southern Interracial Council, it's the Southern Regional Council, and we've got to have interests broader than just race problems. It's a matter of strategy. I think we should refrain from any strong condemnation of segregation, and outline a whole series of things here that we are going to work on. I think many of the other oldtimers, like Charles Johnson and Benjamin Mays and Gordon Hancock, they all agreed. So they wound up with substantially what those statements, Atlanta and Richmond and Durham, had said. So it went on from there. But this discussion was sometimes very heated, very frank, especially by the people who were very strong in the Southern Conference and by this young Negro Youth Council fellow.

JE: You don't remember his name, do you?

GJ: No, I forget that name. This scared the daylights out of some of these people who had fancied themselves to be liberal minded and had taken part in the preliminary statements, but now they got cold feet. A good example of that would be Walter Matherly, Dean of the School of Business at--oh, I don't know if it was Florida State or University of Florida.

JE: Just the discussion itself made him uncomfortable?

GJ: Just the discussion, just scared him. They thought, "Well, my, look at some of these types in here. They're sort of hot-headed, you know. They're militant. They'll get this organization in trouble and get me in trouble." [Laughter] That

was the main point, I think. So you had people like that, a dean of the School of Business, who had never before, I think, taken part in any interracial enterprises. And a business man from Tennessee, I forget his name now. And I think it just sort of scared Dabney a little bit. If McGill had been there and heard it. . . .

JE: It would have scared him, too.

GJ: He would have been worried.

JE: Because none of these men were really integrationists?

GJ: No. They certainly wouldn't want it declared with their names on it. So we got off to sort of a shaky start there, but we finally did come up with the board of directors.

JE: And, of course, Odum was there?

GJ: Oh yes, yes.

JE: I assume that the position he took on this was very much the same as yours.

GJ: Yes.

JE: And, indeed, all of the people who became the sort of central cadre of administrators and executives and board members pretty much bought that position.

GJ: Yes, I think so.

JE: So that SRC began as a more of a centrist organization than the Southern Conference, and always saw that organization as being pretty far off on the left wing?

GJ: Well, they didn't see it so much as being way off on the left end as, oh, not being open and frank enough about what it really believed in. Well, I don't want to get into that, but

I always, from the beginning there, had my doubts about where they were headed, and I knew they had these left-wingers in there, and I just had a distrust of the front organizations.

JE: Did that feeling of wariness on your part extend to the individuals you knew who were members of both, such as Charles Johnson and Benny Mays?

GJ: Oh, no, no.

JE: Or Aubrey Williams or Clark Foreman?

GJ: Now, it did to Clark Foreman and Jim Dombrowski and a few others, but to old-time leaders like Charles Johnson and Benjamin Mays. . . .

JE: Maybe Will Alexander was . . .?

GJ: I knew them and trusted them. So it was a, it's sort of hard to describe it, but I knew Foreman personally pretty well, and I felt that he was somewhat superficial, and a little bit given to publicity-seeking and that sort of thing.

JE: The heatedness of this debate at that first organizational meeting carried over almost immediately, that is to say, kept going, fed by the article that Lillian Smith and Saunders Redding wrote in Common Ground that you responded to. Talk about that a little bit.

GJ: Oh yeah, well, I thought it was a little bit silly. The thing had not really been organized yet, you know, when they wrote this. In fact, I was there in my office in Atlanta in January, '44. Had just gone down there to help set up the charter meeting, and here came this article in Common Ground, which, of course, had been written, I guess, some months earlier.

And I just thought, "Well, what the hell. Here they're telling what this organization's not going to do and attacking it as if they were trying to nip it in the bud or something." So I wrote, well, they asked me to reply, and if I'd do it in a hurry, they could get it in the same issue in which this article would appear. I think that's the case, wasn't it?

JE: It came in the following issue.

GJ: Oh, it did?

JE: Yes sir, came in the next issue. Even so, you had to rush to do it, it would seem to me, knowing how much lead time they take.

GJ: I substantially stand by what I said there, and I think I wound up by saying, "Over there are the peaks, the goals, that you want, but in between there are a lot of foothills you've got to conquer before you get there. Now, let's get together and work. And that's what the Council hopes to do."

JE: You subsequently asked the SRC to invite Lillian Smith to become a board member, and they agreed, unanimously agreed, and she was asked but she turned it down.

GJ: Yes. I had mixed feelings about Lillian Smith. I thought she--how shall I put it--well in some ways she was rather naive, in that she ran in a rather confined atmosphere without putting down some roots in different places. Maybe what I'm trying to say is she was not in a position of responsibility.

JE: She had no institutional base.

GJ: She had no institutional anchorage, just sort of a loner. She was not very good at taking part in the details of any organizational work.

JE: You described them [your feelings] as mixed feelings though. What about her was there that you liked or admired?

GJ: Oh, I had considerable admiration for her fiction, well, her work in general, you know. What do they call that little journal?

JE: It went through several name changes, North Georgia Review. Did you meet her, know her personally?

GJ: Yes, but not closely. I remember going one night, this would have been in late '44, I think, she had been asked to speak at Atlanta University. I went out there and listened and then later I was invited to, I guess, President Mays's home where a group of about ten or fifteen sat on the floor and carried on a discussion with Lillian. I was leaving the building where she had spoken and was going over toward the president's house, and they were various other, you know, students walking through. A couple of boys were coming along right behind me. I could hear them talking with some animation, and just as they passed me one of them said, "Well, it was all right, but, good God, that women's more race-conscious for me than I am for myself." [Laughter] And I think in a way, that's sort of describes it. I had once before come to the conclusion that for most blacks the burning [laughter] issue of the day may not be what some of these white liberals think it is.

JE: You think maybe it was not segregation?

GJ: Oh, I'm sure segregation was involved, but I mean, how much did it actually bear on them in their daily lives? That's where I was concerned. And to listen to Lillian Smith talk you'd think they were just burning constantly with resentment and frustration, and I just thought that on the whole, no, they lived more normal lives than that. [Laughter] They looked on this whole business with a certain amount of amusement and detachment. But they don't seethe all the time. That was my thesis.

JE: I see. Would you say that that was, as you perceived it also, the feeling of people like Charles Johnson and Benjamin Mays and Hancock and P.B. Young and the others who were involved?

GJ: Yeah. They were people, you know, who--they had work to do, and my golly, and they were going to do it. Try to make a success and find ways of manipulating these white people [laughter]. So that they didn't have to feel like they were burning inside all the time.

JE: Yet the debate over Jim Crow kind of went right on, right through this period, and it increased with intensity as the end of the war neared and the whole post-war period came along.

GJ: Well, it gradually came to the point that you knew that the end of that system was approaching. I had long had a great interest in the judicial approach. Well, all kinds of litigation, and had written a little bit on this subject, and had often spoken about it in lectures and in my course on the Negro here at Carolina. I had watched, I expect more closely than most sociologists, the ebb and flow in this whole legal structure.

JE: Because it had been going on for some little while on this whole issue.

GJ: Oh yes. I first got interested in it through the white primary cases in Texas.

JE: That was in '44.

GJ: Oh no, back in the '20s.

JE: Oh, I see, yeah.

GJ: Cases probably you never read, Nixon v. Herndon, Nixon v. Condon, Nixon v. Herndon again. That's a wonderful story.

JE: That redates Smith v. Allwright by twenty years.

GJ: Oh yes, yes. The irony of a Louisiana case, U.S. v. Classic, being the real turning point, and nobody at the time realized it. The main defense in those early cases in Texas, which with any decent Supreme Court, should have been decided way back in the mid-20s in favor of the blacks, the main defense was the primary is a system set up by parties to chose their candidates and it is not an integral part of the electoral process.

JE: Parties were essentially private organizations.

GJ: Yeah.

JE: Yeah, that's the position South Carolina took.

GJ: So there were a couple of Supreme Court decisions back there in those early cases that upheld that view. Then came in '38, I think. . . .

JE: That Missouri case?

GJ: No, not the primary case, U.S. v. Classic in Louisiana. Classic was a sheriff in a Louisiana parish, and there was an

election involving a federal office, but not involving race at all. He pulled some very dirty stuff in the Democratic primary. So much so that, I mean, it was pretty easy to indict him and get him before a federal grand jury. They indicted him for fraud and several other things. He was convicted, and I think he appealed, ended in the Supreme Court. They made a very important decision. They said, "Mr. Classic uses this time-worn defense that the primary is not a part of the election controlled by federal law, and we hold that it is an integral part."

JE: Very significant.

GJ: Yes.

JE: And that was the same Supreme Court, if it was '38, that ruled in that Gaines case in Missouri that allowed the black student to go to the University. So here was the beginning of a legal overturn of segregation, and your interest in litigation made that. . . .

GJ: I had been following all of that for years, you know. So you see, it's no wonder then when the crucial white primary case came up again that the Supreme Court said, in effect, well, yes, this is a part of the electoral process. You can't keep doing this.

JE: Okay, if I may interrupt you a minute, that happened in '44, Smith v. Allwright. The Myrdal study came out in '44.

GJ: Oh, wait a minute. Oh, I guess you're right.

JE: In January of '45, Will Alexander wrote an article in Harpers in which he took great pains to look at segregation as sort of the stumbling block to southern process, and came down

saying, "We've got to deal with it." So by the end of the war, by summer '45, there are all these signs out there, all across the southern landscape.

GJ: Yeah, that it's crumbling, yeah, because so many little bites had been taken out, you know, Pullman travel, dining cars, certain situations involving interstate commerce and all that, and then the gradual inroads they were making on university segregation. There's a whole flock of cases there that were beginning to open up, oh, say, half of the southern universities.

JE: Yeah, Arkansas had some voluntary desegregation along in there.

GJ: Texas, Oklahoma.

JE: Texas and Oklahoma cases were coming. The Kentucky case came a little later.

GJ: And it got up to Tennessee and North Carolina.

JE: So another thing, in mid-45, Ira Reed, working for you, did that segregation study, you recall?

GJ: Yeah.

JE: Mainly on transportation, and there was another big argument in SRC about, you know, how do we deal with this? What kind of visibility do we give to this? Did you find yourself, by that time, beginning to feel that at some very near point it was going to be necessary for SRC to reconsider this and take a position, or did you feel that it was. . . ?

GJ: Oh, I just thought the thing was rolling, and that was exactly what I had always expected. That it was not going to be solved by political action in the South because they were not

ready for it. And it was not going to be solved by organizations voting against segregation, but it was going to be solved in the courts. That was the only element of government--state, local, federal--that had the freedom to act and make a sudden change, and that's what they did. That was the whole basis of my feeling about strategy, you know. You can get out there and talk and shout your head off about getting rid of segregation, but that's not going to get rid of it. You're going to get rid of it through judicial action.

JE: Well, where did that leave SRC as an organization then, in terms of the policy that it operated under? Was it your feeling that it ought to stick to the policy that it had and wait for the litigation?

GJ: Well, I don't think I ever considered that [laughter]. [Pause] I guess I felt they [the SRC] were not committed to, you know, preserving segregation. They were just committed to doing what they could on all kinds of southern problems, but not make a frontal attack on segregation.

JE: In other words, it would be better to wait for the courts to do that than for the organization to take any initiative.

GJ: That's what I felt. Just give them a little time, they're going to do it for you. Then the whole outfit would be made honest overnight, you see. Then you could start working on the problems of desegregation. I don't think I ever felt any dilemma there because of what the courts were doing. I expected it and I welcomed it. Well, I don't know. I guess maybe I was

blind to what we should have been doing. It didn't occur to me, "Now, let's have a meeting, and let's get a new policy statement."

JE: In point of fact, it was 1951 before SRC did have a new policy statement.

GJ: Oh really, I didn't realize that.

JE: In that year they took a position saying that in order to do the work that they had set out to do, it was just simply imperative for them to say that segregation was harmful to the South and that it needed to be eradicated.

GJ: Yeah, that's right.

JE: That was in '51. Before that had been these other things, Myrdal, in a sense, said that in American Dilemma, and individuals like Will Alexander and increasingly others did. And then the Civil Rights Committee in '47, responding to--primarily, as I read that, Harry Truman created the U.S. Committee on Civil Rights primarily in angry reaction at that lynching in Monroe, Georgia. Four people were killed, and the federal government was unable to crack that. He created that committee, and Mrs. Tilly was on it, and Frank Graham was on it.

GJ: Yes, as I recall, I spoke to that committee, witness or something.

JE: And their document issued in, I forget the month, '47, said that segregation ought to have no place in a democratic society. I mean, it was a very forthright statement. But SRC still--you had gone back to Chapel Hill by that time--under George Mitchell, all the way to 1951, couldn't resolve this

internal debate. And when they finally did resolve it, almost in the next day's mail, Virginius Dabney's resignation came. He had been inactive through that period, but he never had really resigned until the organization took that position, and he sent in his letter saying he couldn't do it.

GJ: Yes, that's sort of expected. It's funny. He wrote that book, wasn't it on liberalism in the south?

JE: In 1932. Hardly mentioned race.

GJ: His liberalism never ran very deep.

JE: You know, hindsight is almost a 20-20 vision, Dr. Johnson, and I know in a way it's unfair for me to ask this question, but I find myself, now, as I look back on that period, say 1945, from the end of the war, until 1950, by which time McCarthyism had sent such a chill through society.

GJ: Oh Lord, yeah.

JE: That five-year period looks now, in retrospect, like a golden opportunity that was missed by the South to make some voluntary change ahead of litigation that might have prevented 25 years of turmoil and bloodshed and all that followed. I've said that to some people, and they say, "Well, yeah, I can see that, but things have their own momentum. There wouldn't have been any way you could have rushed it up. It would have taken this long anyway." What's your view on that?

GJ: Well, I don't see how an organization which was practically no mass support. . . .

JE: I don't mean just SRC, but I'm thinking about the political front. There's Ellis Arnall; there's Jim Folsom.

GJ: Yes, well, I think they represented some forward looking people who were doing what they could.

JE: But that wasn't the South?

GJ: But I don't think they could have taken very liberal stances and got any where.

JE: The hard truth is the South just wasn't ready to do that, was it? It couldn't have been persuaded to do what it ultimately was compelled to do?

GJ: Right, it just took this shock by the Supreme Court.

JE: And the black protests.

GJ: And they learned they could live with it [laughter]. The revolution in southern politics especially, and that's where the legal business is so important. The list of black mayors and legislators and other black people elected, you just wouldn't believe it.

JE: Yeah, it's amazing. It truly has been revolutionary. A lot of people said back then, "The law says separate but equal, and if we'll make separate truly equal, we're in keeping with the law and we can. . ."

GJ: Oh yes, they clung to that myth for a long time, and you had these perfectly asinine schemes of all kinds tried. I [laughter] predicted a lot of that stuff in my presidential address at the Southern Sociological Society in '54. This was in March or April. We met in Atlanta at the Biltmore Hotel. This was a, what did I call it, "A Southern Sociologist Looks at Racial Desegregation," or something.

JE: Okay, good, I'll look that up. That's certainly one I want to read.

GJ: And I began by saying, "One morning soon the Supreme Court is going to pass a new law." [Laughter] Then I explained how sitting in the barber shop, a friend came up and he said, "Is the Supreme Court about to pass a new law?" And it struck me funny for a moment, and then I thought that's exactly what they do. I went on and talked about things that had led up to all this--black changes in the white primary system, and opening the universities and so on. Then I made some predictions on what would be some of the consequences of such a Supreme Court decision. One set of these predictions had to do with the crazy things that would be tried throughout the South, especially the deep South.

JE: I'm going to read that piece this afternoon. Let me ask you a couple of more things. Do you feel that by 1950 when the coming together of deep racial animosity and turmoil in South with this whole McCarthyism thing really had quieted a kind of liberal urge in the South to the point where, say, from '50 to '54 there was nothing like the activity there had been earlier. Is that true?

GJ: I think that's true, yes. That was a very repressive period.

JE: That period of time was pretty quiet.

GJ: George Mitchell, I guess he was at a great disadvantage. Let me say, I started to say privately, but I guess it wouldn't be too privately, that when some of these

leaders discussed with me who my successor might be, I was opposed to choosing George Mitchell. Well, he had this CIO-AFL labor background, and I think it was generally known he was a philosophical Marxist. I said, "Now, you're going to have people. . . We already had some of it when Ferguson--not Ferguson, that was by Texas background--Talmadge people got in again. They gave us a little trouble. They had offices in the same building where we did, and they did a little spying. Well, I said, "You get people like this. You get this post-war, conservative swing, and you're going to have a lot of problems, especially with this, what was it, House UnAmerican Activities Committee."

JE: Right, which was really going strong by then.

GJ: Well, and of course, they did. They came through the South holding these hearings. I was a little surprised they never got hold of me, because just to be associated with an organization like SRC was enough to condemn you.

JE: So you were opposed to Mitchell?

GJ: Yes, just on the grounds of filling that spot now with somebody who didn't have what I'd call a tainted background, you know. I don't know how much they hurt him, but anyway the whole atmosphere was just turned backward for a while. The council lost members, lost contributions, and it came down to the point that Mitchell had to reduce the staff to just a skeleton, and for a few months I think he borrowed on. . . .

JE: His own insurance policy. . .

GJ: To cover the salaries of the few he had left.

JE: Those were pretty lean times.

GJ: It was just sort of a standstill.

JE: In light of that, as you look on that period, here were people who had tried their dead level best to make the South more progressive within the limits of the law. They were not subversives. They were not radicals. No matter what house committee might say, SRC was never a subversive organization. I mean, for goodness sake, and we know that. And yet, here it was reduced to a handful of people by 1950, totally ineffective, left with no resources. Could you conclude from that that the real institutions of southern society--the press, the universities, the church, not to say the political parties and whatnot--had really failed the region in its effort to look down the road and try to figure out a better way to operate?

GJ: Well, I don't know that I'd put it quite that way.

JE: Think of the press that spoke with a more liberal voice in 1940 than it did in '50. Think of the ministers you know who were more outspoken and more progressive in '40 than they could be in '50. And think of this very university here, which had been a citadel of liberalism in the South, and indeed, in the nation, and by the time Frank Graham left here, it did not any longer have that kind of outward thrust and progressive social change motivation. Is that not true?

GJ: Well, no, I wouldn't agree with that entirely. I think it's very hard to make generalizations about that kind of thing. There was a certain amount of mythology. . . .

END OF TAPE 2, SIDE A

END OF INTERVIEW