

Interview

with

ANGUS THOMPSON, SR.

October 21, 2003

by Malinda Maynor

Transcribed by Sharon Caughill

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

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START OF TAPE 1, SIDE A

ANGUS THOMPSON, SR.  
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ANGUS THOMPSON: . . . black. My daddy was quite interested in education. He used to run the school board, and initiated building the school, the high school out here. I was in the first graduating class out there.

MALINDA MAYNOR: At Rosenwald?

AT: No, no, no.

MM: Oh.

AT: Remember I told you I finished twice.

MM: Right, right, right. Okay.

AT: This was the first time. At the time I knew he had told us, well there was two of his children in the class, but he told us that we weren't going to get any credit. That's simply because the school has a criteria set for a high school, really, and that first year, the math, the science, it didn't come up to par. He knew that. It wasn't up to par. But he said, if I move you all well, it was a flop. The school wouldn't be finished. And the people moved out of there, they wouldn't stay. There was just a few of us in there. So we stayed. I was valedictorian of the class out here. We had to come back, and had to go down here to Fairmont to Rosenwald the next year, I think it was maybe three months, to get a certified diploma. That's why I said I had to graduate twice.

MM: Right.

AT: Yes.

MM: That's amazing.

AT: That's what happened there. Work-year student in 1940. A work-year student, you worked and went to school.

MM: Okay. We call them work-study students now.

AT: That's a new name now.

MM: Occupational experience. Do you want to include your army—[tape cuts off]

MM: This is tape 10.21.03-AT. The interviewee is Mr. Angus Thompson, Sr. We're at his house in Lumberton, North Carolina. The interviewer is Malinda Maynor. So, Mr. Thompson, maybe you could start by telling us about your father and telling us about his starting the NAACP chapter in Robeson County, kind of that time period, what you were doing then, some of the things that were going on here.

AT: Well, the NAACP chapter was initiated here in Robeson County by my father during the time that I was overseas. I was overseas from 1942 to 1945 when I came home. My father was very much interested in civil rights as well as education. He would step out in front as a leader in civil rights and when he could even in education. My father, I don't think he even ever finished high school, but he was very intellectual and was considered a leader in the county, church, and community activities.

MM: What kind of work did he do?

AT: Brick mason and farm. Yes, after he quit the farm he became a brick mason and laid brick. In fact, he learned to lay brick when he was chairman of the school board [actually, the school committee] out at Back Swamp and was building that school. A good friend of his named Professor Isley who was a regular old brick mason. At that time

he learned to lay brick right out there. He was also chairman of that school board, and that's why he had Professor Isley out there as a construction builder.

MM: So before you went to the war where were you attending school?

AT: I attended school at Back Swamp. I was a member of the first class that you might call high school class. At that time our classes, high school, was from eighth grade to eleventh. We didn't have twelfth grade at that time. That was where I was living, out there, and that's where I finished. Because of a lack of accreditation for that school for the first year—the science department wasn't up. The library department wasn't up where we could get some credit, so I had to spend three months at Rosenwald in Fairmont the next year to get my certified diploma.

MM: Your actual high school diploma.

AT: A high school diploma. So, now, after that, I finished school right here in 1937. That was at Back Swamp. In 1938 I went back three months to Rosenwald and got a certified diploma. After that I worked in tobacco in 1939, tobacco markets, Durham, and on tobacco markets here. In 1940 I'd saved up enough money to enter Hampton Institute. That's when I entered Hampton on September the 9<sup>th</sup>, 1940. I was a work-year student. That's what we were called. On October the 16<sup>th</sup>, 1940, was when the call for all men the age of twenty-one to go to their local board for registering for the war. That was in October of 1940. Nineteen hundred and forty-one, my second year in school, then is when they called me to go into the service. Of course, I got a deferment twice. The third time they didn't grant me a deferment. They told me that I'd have to report to my local board for service, which I did. So in 1941 I left school in October, on October the

16<sup>th</sup>, came home to my local board and was inducted into the service on November the 19<sup>th</sup>. From that date I was discharged from the service October, 1945.

MM: Okay. And you returned home then?

AT: Returned home. Went back to school at Hampton in the trade school. When I first went I went in the Ag department, but after I came back I went to the trade school and finished trade in tailoring, then came back home and worked for a few months with another tailor who was already set up here, then went into the tailor business for myself right here on the Fairmont Road. That's what it was then. It's Martin Luther King, Jr. Drive.

MM: Now did you get involved in the NAACP when you came back and started working?

AT: Not immediately. I was a member, but so far as holding office, no. After my daddy's passing I became president of the chapter for a couple of terms.

MM: And when did he pass away?

AT: My daddy passed in 1973.

MM: Okay.

AT: Nineteen seventy-three, April 25<sup>th</sup>. Yes. Really my mother was the one, which was his wife, trying to hold it up, to keep it going. But one thing, after the county chapter was organized then all the municipalities here formed chapters: Fairmont, and Red Springs, St. Pauls, Maxton, and Rowland, and Lumberton. All of them formed.

MM: Okay.

AT: And they formed after your father formed the county chapter?

AT: Oh yes. There was no kind of chapter here until daddy got a chapter formed in maybe 43. So we it went that way with all these chapters operating here until maybe about three, or four, or five years ago. All the chapters were slowly not doing too much, even Robeson County, so the national offices advised all the chapters in this county to merge into one chapter.

MM: And that was just here recently?

AT: Yes, that was just here recently, four or five years ago. So we did that, and it's basically that way now, all merged into the Robeson County chapter.

MM: Okay.

AT: And that's the only chapter in the county right now that's active and got a charter.

MM: How effective was the NAACP did you think in the 1940s and the 1950s? What kinds of things was the organization doing?

AT: In the 1950s?

MM: Yeah.

AT: And the 1940s? The NAACP at that time did a lot of fighting for people who were accused of certain crimes and things of that nature that the NAACP felt sure that they wasn't receiving justice and things like that. Now, NAACP became active in the school integration during the 1950s, but the NAACP was working from the national level instead of this county level at that time. We even had Thurgood Marshall who was joint council for the national NAACP to come here and speak. That was in September in 1952. And why that stands out, that was the year [Hurricane] Hazel came through in September, 1952, and he was delayed. His flight was delayed coming in so he was late

getting here that night. He did come here and speak and everything. At that particular time the NAACP on the national level was fighting hard for integration and had the suit. It was already initiated to integrate the schools on the basis that separate but equal was unconstitutional. In 54, that's when the NAACP was successful in getting the Supreme Court to pass the law that separate but equal was unconstitutional.

MM: What was your reaction to that ruling?

AT: Oh, well, we were overjoyed. Now, we knew at that time it would be a slow process because tradition is not an easy thing for anyone to get out of. Naturally, we knew that to integrate the schools was going to be tough and slow because we knew that white folks were not ready for that. They wasn't used to it. I could understand that very well, but that didn't make it right, so we kept fighting. We kept fighting. What really set the ball to rolling was whenever the U.S. Supreme Court ruled on *Brown v. Topeka* that separate but equal was unconstitutional and the justice department and the president ordered to integrate the schools in Arkansas.

Now that started the ball rolling. And, of course, out there, the same as it is here, they resisted. Even the governors wasn't ready, and the governors represented the people. Naturally, they were going to try to satisfy the people. At that particular time—I never will forget it. This was the first one. At that time the governor was Farbus out there. He was Governor Farbus. Of course all these Southern governors was against school integration, and they were just reluctant to do it. These Southern governors, they went against it. They were slow. They just wouldn't accept it. What they did out here in Arkansas, Farbus—the justice department told them, “Open the door and let them integrate the schools.” The governors took the initiative to place their state national

guards in the school door to keep them from going there, keep blacks from going there even after they had been ordered to do so. That was very easy because after Farbus put the guards there to keep them out, I know this because General Eisenhower—he was president at that time. He was General when I was in the service. But he was the president. He took the same guards out there in Arkansas and federalized them. He said, “you’ll all have to move.” Federalized them there at that school. They was already placed there by the state to keep blacks out. He federalized them, so “you all make way, clear out,” so the blacks could come in. That’s what happened.

MM: Was that happening here in North Carolina?

AT: Oh, no. Not at that time.

MM: What was happening here?

AT: Well, the first thing after that, that was national. That was for nationally. If it was for Arkansas, it was order for everybody. They passed an order to start desegregating the schools. The Justice Department told them to do it. I’m trying to think of the word that they used, but slowly do it. That was what they was telling them to do. But, as I said, all of them bucked up. After they were moving slow, then the Justice Department turned around and kind of give them a time to speed up the integration. Of course, then it was just that the schools had to be integrated, but every school system in the South. The boards were trying their best, and the state, even our state legislature, what they did, they drew up a plan. They had been ordered to do it, how they were going to integrate.

And our plan, the State of North Carolina legislature, was named the Pearsall Plan. Pearsall was a legislator up there. Now, the Pearsall Plan places in it to still keep



their schools integrated. They started building schools for blacks after they had been ordered, to build schools in the black communities and white schools in the white communities. After the Justice Department got onto that they told them, "How are we going to integrate them?" They said, "You have to bus them. You have to bus them to integrate them," because if you use neighborhood schools they wasn't integrated. School in the black and ( ) go to it, that's black. School in the white, go to it, it's white.

They started busing, and that busing was very effective even right here in Lumberton. They asked for a bond issue to build two high schools, a high school over here in the south, South Lumberton, which was predominantly black, and a high school over in Lumberton, North Lumberton which was predominantly white. Now for the two schools the bond issue was a million and a half dollars, one and a half million dollars, and it was stated the half million to build the school in South Lumberton and a million to build the one in North Lumberton. Well, I was fighting that myself just hook, line, and sinker.

MM: So this was the early 1960s, right, the bond issue?

AT: Yes, ma'am. I was fighting it hook, line, and sinker because at that time I had my oldest child, Mishelle, she was four years ahead of our second child ( ) child, academically. She was four years ahead of him. After the bond issue passed at the second count, it fell through the first time but it passed the second count, they built two schools here. They build two, one in South Lumberton, one in North Lumberton. After they did that, and that was taken to the Justice Department, they found it out, they ordered this school system, "You won't have but one high school in Lumberton." So my daughter was a member of the last class that finished the black high school over here. They had to

shut it down and use it for a junior high. That's what it is today, a junior high. It was the only junior high in the city, and the white one became the only senior high school in the city. So regardless of what color you were, if you were a senior you had to go to the same school. You had to go to the same junior high.

MM: How successful did you feel like the Justice Department's solution was?

AT: It was just what we needed. I'll tell you what, if that hadn't happened today we'd be right at the brink of where we were when we was freed from slavery. That started, not only in schools, it started integration at the lunch counters, integration of the buses, integration of motels, and all of these establishments. They were fighting it, but the Justice Department was pushing it. That was all over the South. And today, today it caused one race to realize that there're smart people in all races. It caused them to realize that blacks as well as whites have to have an opportunity to advance, progress just as they have. Through the generations it has caused even this younger generation to become less- - well, basically they're color blind now. The children, the white children of today and the black children or any minorities, Indians and all. Naturally now I must say this, there's discrimination and segregation amongst these races themselves to a certain degree. You're going to find that, but today the races intermingle, they co-mingle. What has brought it about is just this initiation of the school desegregation plan.

It's true right now that we have a lot of whites. We also have a lot of blacks. But still, we got some blacks, of course most of them are by gone by now, they don't like mixing the races. And whites, they don't like it. But we're at a place where we can't help ourselves because after our children reach a certain age now, we lose control over them.

They go for themselves, and that's the way they should be going. You can't wait until they're forty or fifty years and then turn them loose. It's just been a blessing.

You know, I've seen things take place that if they'd been during my time I'd of been hanging in a tree. Hanging in a tree. I've seen a time in this area a smart black man couldn't show it but so much. He just had to shut up. If you did, they'd call you smart, and maybe flog you to death. I give God the credit for all of this, but it just brought the races closer together.

MM: What did you think about what Indians were doing at that time in the late 50s and early 60s, say the KKK thing, how did you react to that?

AT: Oh, that was marvelous. That was marvelous. Now, at one time, I want to say this about the Indians. The black population was heavier than the Indian population. Most Indians, they nest. They live everywhere, but their nest was in the Pembroke area. Of course, the whites was against them just like they were against blacks, but they accepted the Indians, as I saw it, a degree above the blacks. It was like this, "Well, if we're going to have to have one to mingle with," they would prefer the Indians. You may see a little of that now. Life is just real. That's just the way it is.

Again, we all had a lot of prejudice. The black race was filled with prejudice, too. We've got that. That's human nature. But, yet, if we're going to call ourselves Christians and things we must struggle to get beyond some of that stuff. In order for us to be successful and have a successful society we must work together.

MM: Did you feel that there were Indians that didn't want to work with blacks at that time?

AT: To start with they partnered with the blacks. I can remember clearly that's the way we had to vote. The blacks and the Indians was getting together when it came to elections to vote. We have a little of that now, but the population of the Indians is the greatest population out of the three races now. They're much more independent now than they were back then.

MM: Was it more equal back then, the population, or who was dominating?

AT: The white were dominating, and our population was greater than the Indian population, but now the Indian population is greater than the black or the white. Of course, back in that time I could see that coming, myself. I give the good Lord the credit because I even spoke to one of the Indian leaders that lived not far here from me. When we was getting ready for elections, he came over here and sat down on the porch and we talked. I said, "Well, Worth," that was his name, Worth Hunt. I said, "Now, it's true that we've got to work together to have any say-so in this county with these white folks." I said, "Because we're out numbered." We all knew that. We knew that. I said, "But you know what," I told him, I said, "Now it looks to me like the Indian population was just beginning to grow." I said, "It looks to me like in five or ten years the Indian race looks like it's fixing to double their population." And he admitted it. He said, "Since you said that, that's what we plan to do." I said, "You're planning to take this county back over." Jokingly I said that, but I knew that the Indians felt like the land had been taken from them, and if I'd been in their shoes if there was any way to take it back, take it back. But I'm caught in the middle. I'm caught in the middle right here.

MM: Right, absolutely.

AT: Being a black man.

MM: How did that change or shape your strategy for dealing with the problem?

AT: Well, to tell you the truth it didn't. It has changed it a little. Right now I can tell you this, where we used to partner with the Indians there are some cases now that we might even partner with the whites, but back then we couldn't partner with the whites. They didn't want us. No way.

I can remember very clearly the first time a white ever came to me. It was a white running for county commissioners. This commissioner came to me asking me about how I felt about a run off. And I told this commissioner, I said, "Well, you know it's something to know that you've come to me." I said, "Never before have the white folks eyes been open enough to see that they might need black support." We were open to them then, but they didn't care nothing about our vote. But anyway I told this commissioner, I said, "I just had a thought." I asked him what the commission was doing, asking me—I didn't put it that way, but I knew what they was asking me—did I think I could help them get enough support to get in?

MM: In the run off.

AT: Yeah. From the blacks. And I just flat told him, "I don't know. I hadn't even thought of it." But I did tell him, "This is something you should have been looking at in years past." It's made racists see themselves, all of us. It's made racists see themselves. I really think, well, I hate to say it like this because in every race we've got some who we call ourselves followers of Christ. Always we follow Christ. We know His word, but yet we fail to do it. I think it's caused all of us to look at our Christian life. I know that it has been flawed beyond measure. There's still flaws in them. There's still some flaws in them.

MM: Maybe we could talk a little bit then about after the Justice Department came in and said there had to be only one high school, the City of Lumberton tried another tactic.

AT: Oh, yes.

MM: Right, to keep the schools segregated. Let's talk about that.

AT: Now, after the city built these two schools, two black high schools and had to shut them down. Then the City of Lumberton's next tactic was they'd keep them from heavily mixing. Blacks had never, never in their life, paid one cent to come to the city high schools and never been asked to if you lived out in the county. Whites had always paid, if you lived in the county to come to the city schools. But after it was forced to integrate the school, the city used the tactics, "We're going to charge the black now if they don't live in the city. We're going to charge them to come to school. Thirty-five dollars a head. We're going to charge them."

They knew that would eliminate a whole lot of blacks because they didn't have the money. And they were right. They were exactly right. So they put that fee on. They had a right to put it on if they wanted to. They had been charging the white, but we knew the reason they were doing it, to keep you out.

There were some parents, black parents had five, six, seven, eight, nine children in school, and they couldn't pay thirty-five dollars a head. The majority of the blacks over in the South Lumberton area, the city limits at that time started up at McMillan Funeral Home. Well, the city school board had already bought property out here where the junior high is now, and had the city board to extend the city limits out there so they could build a school and have the property. Our city council did that. They actually did that, but they

didn't include anything but just the highway. The residential and east side between McMillan's Funeral Home and the new high school was in the county. Nothing but the highway ( ) road.

MM: And who lived in those houses?

AT: Blacks. Nothing but blacks on both sides. It's still that way now. So these people came. They couldn't pay thirty-five dollars a head. They came to me and asked me what they could do.

Well, at that time my daughter had finished high school. I just had a son, and he was just entering high school. Some of these parents had five, six, seven, eight children. My response was well, "There's only one way in the world that we might be able to get in here, and that is through legal counsel. We cannot use any counsel here Lumberton," because it was nothing but white.

MM: So you couldn't hire any lawyers because they were all white?

AT: You could hire them, but it wouldn't make a difference. They asked me if I knew anybody that might help.

END OF TAPE ONE, SIDE A

BEGINNING OF TAPE ONE, SIDE B

MM: Now go ahead for us. Julius Chambers.

AT: Julius had just sued UNC so he could go to school there. So I contacted Julius, and he agreed to come and look our situation over and help us. So we were meeting at McMillan Funeral Home. He came down twice to talk to us and look the situation over. The second time he left and went back he called me. He said, "Angus,

I've been in communication with your black city councilman. I've been in communication with your school board superintendent, Dr. Carroll."

MM: Is it Gale, G-A-L-E?

AT: Carroll, C-A-R-R-O-L-L.

MM: I'm sorry, okay.

AT: He said, "Neither one of them want to compromise. In fact, the superintendent told me that he wasn't interested in meeting with our group over there. Nothing he can do for them." He said, "The city councilman said there were two different bodies. The school board was independent. The city council was independent of the school board." He said, "Well, they ought to know that I know better than that. All city councils work together with the school board on certain issues." He said, "In the first place the school board didn't zigzag that line out there like it did to build that school." He said, "The city council had to put it out there. They did it for the school board." He said, "That councilman insulted my intelligence." He said, "He really made me hot, so I'm going to tell you what you do." He said, "You get your group together down there." He said, "When they did that they broke a statute of the state of North Carolina." He told me what that statute was. At that time if you extend the city limit you had to take into consideration all the ( ) of the residents, and they did not, not one. He said, "We've got to put heat to the seat, sue the school board and the city council." So he came down the third time. He said, "Be ready to show me what you want in the school district." That's the way he was going to approach it and soon.

So he came down the third time. When he was getting ready to go, as I've said we always met at McMillan Funeral Home, our black city councilman was in the rear. I



didn't know he was in there, but when he heard Chambers make his plan of what he was going to do, he immediately jumped up and said, "No, don't sue. We can help you. I can help you."

MM: The city councilman jumped up and said that?

AT: Yes. So I said, "I didn't know you was back there. You could have been helping us a long time ago and saved us a little money to put in our pockets." Julius said, "Angus, it's whatever you all want to do." I said, "We're ready to go and show you where you're wrong." I said, "This councilman didn't ask for to go along with us." And Julius asked me, and I said, "Sure it's all right. All we want is him to go along." So he did, he came right along with us and joked the whole while we was out there.

So after we began to show him what we was going to do, I never will forget, we got down to McCollum Street, and when we got to McCollum Street the next street over was Starlite Drive. That's where the Indians lived on Starlite Drive. Nothing but blacks living on McCollum Street. So I suggested, I said, "Let's go down half way between Starlite Drive and McCollum Street out to Fairmont Road." That's what it was at that time. It's Martin Luther King now. This councilman says, "No, lets go to Starlite Drive." At that time I said, "Look, I have not talked to those people on Starlite Drive," which I hadn't. I said, "I don't even know what they want." I said, "They're Indians." I said, "I haven't talked with them. They might throw a monkey wrench in it." Julius said, "That's all right. Whatever you want."

So we came on with the line coming half way between the two streets and got to Fairmont road, and then we had make a decision, "Where are we going now?" This

councilman said, "Well now, we'll just go straight on across here to Allen Street." That's kind of a left horizontal.

Well, now I'm living, my residence is sitting now on the other side of Starlite Drive right here where it is now. My son, he's in school, and I want him in school. This councilman said, "Why don't you pay the thirty-five dollars?" I said, "Yes, sir. I could pay you thirty-five dollars to get my son in school, but when we get through drawing this line I can just see the city council and the school board ain't going to let nobody just beyond this school district line come in there." Chambers said, "You're right." He said, "What do you want me to do?" So I just suggested, I said, "In order that my son may continue go right down the highway south, down to the south line, include my residence and then come back up, then we'll go across the other streets." He drew it on a piece of paper and wrote in there to include Angus Thompson's residence. It's in there that way by name now if they didn't throw it away.

Then we came on back to the funeral home. This councilman said, "Now, I could take this and get it through for you all." And Chambers said, "What do you want to about it, Angus." I said, "He can do anything. It don't make no difference as long as it's done." We just handed it over to him. He took it and went to the school board, and it was okayed. It was okayed just as beautiful as ever.

[BOTH LAUGH.]

MM: They're like, "Sure."

AT: Yeah. Yeah. They could have done it all the time. Then they began to have problems. The whites began to have a problem. Right here Clyburne Pines, Barker Ten Mile, all of those schools. They were out of the city limits in no school district, so they

started crying about how could they get their children in the city limits? And the superintendent told them, "Do like South Lumberton. Get your petition together to get them in." I listened to that, and I said, "He wouldn't tell us nothing, but he's telling them now how to get in."

MM: Now is that Mr. Carroll?

AT: Yeah, that was Carroll.

MM: You were telling me last time about a meeting that you were at Carroll Middle School, is this that same time period?

AT: Yeah, this is the same thing.

MM: Late 1970s?

AT: Yes. Now, I had a cousin. She was teaching over to Carroll Middle School. She came in one evening, and called me, "Angus," she said, "they had a meeting over here at Clyburne Pines. These white folks had a meeting in the school. They're wanting to get their children in the city school." Lawyer Lee, he was school board, and he agreed. Lawyer Lee, really, I don't even think he knew what was going on.

MM: Lloyd Lee?

AT: Lawyer. L-A-W-Y-E-R.

MM: Okay.

AT: He was the speaker, and he was telling all these people how hard the school board had worked to get South Lumberton in. I said, "He didn't know no better." She said, "But they'll have another meeting, and this time for the high school." She said, "I'll let you know when they're going to have it."

So they did. They had another meeting. Me and my wife, Angus was just out of law school, 1977, he was with us, but he won't say nothing now. At this meeting they were crying about what they could do to get their children in the city schools. It was announced, "Anybody that had anything to say," and that auditorium filled up, "feel free." All you had to do was go up to the podium and tell them. I didn't even move until everybody finished. It wasn't nothing but white folks, the ones that was complaining then. Lee had told them how hard they worked to get South Lumberton in and all that kind of stuff.

Now at that time my pastor happened—he was on the school board. He was sitting on the stage. All the school board was sitting on the stage. My pastor was on there. So, after they all finished I got up and went down to the podium, all the way down. Told them who I was, "Angus [Thompson.]" I said, "I want to set the record straight. I want to know how South Lumberton got into the school district." And I told them what we had went through, that we had gotten Julius Chambers out of Charlotte, and he threatened to sue. I said, "After we showed him what we wanted in the school line and he drew it up," I said, "our black city councilman was with us. He told us that he could get this thing agreed to and incorporated." I said, "So, we let him do it. That's how we got in here, not through them working for us. It was through a fight." And you could hear a rat jump on ( ). And when we came out-- Lillian, what was the name of that woman's organization?

Lillian [his wife]: I don't remember.

AT: Boy, they come at me. I knew those white folks didn't know what was going on. So I told them, I said, "Yeah, that's how we got in here." And I showed them how these children were growing up being misled.

Lillian: And paid a lawyer to come in.

AT: Yeah, we had to fight to get in there.

Lillian: We had to ( ).

AT: Yes, Lordy. That's how we got in here. Anyway, the president, he came to me that night. She left here. They got on her so bad that she left this place. I don't even know what happened to the organization because she was getting a write up in the paper and all that stuff. But even at that, later on when it came out in the paper, it came out through the news media that the black city councilman fought for us to get in the school district. He didn't do nothing to keep the suit ( ), but draw it up.

But, I can understand those things. They didn't know. That school board lawyer said, "Angus, I didn't know all of that." I said, "I know you didn't, and you didn't try to find out either." That's just what I told him. He didn't know it, but he was with them. He was the lawyer. He was white. He could have found out, but there was nobody caring about us.

MM: How did you get the money to pay Julius Chambers?

AT: Out of our pockets.

MM: How did you raise it?

AT: Out of our pockets. In fact, I told them. At that time I knew all we needed to do is take care of his expenses from Charlotte. He wasn't coming to be charging us. I

think the first time he came down it was about thirty-five dollars. That was all we gave him. Thirty-five dollars, that was big money then.

[BOTH LAUGH.]

AT: But he loved it. That was the point of it. NAACP was paying him. Of course the NAACP has never been a money maker. You don't make nothing too much. That's like my son. As soon as he came out they took him there and he was made state NAACP lawyer. All that stuff worked well.

MM: Were there members of the black community who were not part of the NAACP and who resisted what you were doing, or disagreed with it?

AT: No, no, no, no, no.

MM: No.

AT: Well, at the time you know I hate to tell you, but at that time most of the blacks—the whites had picked out a leader for the blacks. The white people had picked out a black leader for the blacks. When I say the white, even if we elected them, especially at that time, blacks were not thinking for themselves like they think now. The status quo was this. If you had some education or not, they were looking for somebody to follow. Not thinking for themselves, what did they know about laws and all that stuff? None of them had been exposed to that stuff. So we had a black leader.

Personally, I didn't agree with everything that these black leaders said because our black leaders ( ). They'd been to me and said, "Now, Angus, you come on and help push this bond issue. Your wife's teaching, and she's got to have a job" and all this. All that kind of stuff. That was the attitude and the way they felt. Go along with these white folks so we could get the little cheese. I don't even want this to go in there, but I think

our black leader was getting the money put in his pocket. I don't know that. Anyway, I told them, I said, "Well, I'll do anything. I'll run like a rabbit before I send my people down the streets.

[SOUND OF TELEPHONE RINGING IN THE BACKGROUND.]

MM: Let me just cut this off.

[TAPE IS TURNED OFF AND THEN BACK ON.]

MM: Okay, go ahead.

AT: The mass of the black people at that time, they were looking for a leader, and we had black leaders. But I'm going to tell you today, that's about faded out. Mass of the black people, you could give them a dollar, two dollars, and they'd vote for anybody you said. They knew nothing about who's qualified or elections. They didn't know anybody who was on the ticket, and rightfully so. They didn't know about stuff like that. I used to ask them a whole lot. When I'd be in meetings they'd come and say, "Well who are the white leaders in here? You talking about the Black leaders? Who you all got leading you?" That was natural, somewhat comprehensive.

Integration has brought about now where the mass of the blacks think for themselves. And that's why they think for themselves now. It's integration. I was out there by myself fighting.

MM: Is that what it felt like?

AT: Oh, yes, Lord. Oh yes. You take my wife right here. She's a member of a lot of civic clubs, sororities, but I'll never forget. We integrated—and this was another thing I saw.

We didn't have no city pools. There were white pools. They were in the white section, North Lumberton. Got to complaining about, "We want a pool." My idea was to build us a city pool. All right, now where they going to put it? They put in a bond issue to put a pool over here in Parkview. We didn't solve nothing with that. I said, "No, they're fixing to build a mud hole over here." I said, "No, we're just going to build one. Build it centralized." I was even fighting my wife's club because they were following that black leader at that time. I was cussing her out too. I said, "Give them money to do that. That's segregating again." But that fell through. We didn't build no pool now, and we don't have a city pool today. I tell you. I know all this stuff.

MM: Do you ever think twice about that? Do you ever say, "Well, maybe some pool's better than no pool?" Do you ever say that to yourself?

AT: Oh, no. I don't even think about it now. When I said don't think about it, people, blacks they're where they can go somewhere and swim, and things, and so forth. But what I could see, hey, were going to do the same thing.

Remember what I told you they did about the schools? Big high school over there, a black high school over here, and a white. They were going to put a city little old pool over here and build a fine pool up there. Now, I'm going to not build one. So we didn't build none. It's obvious why we didn't build none. I know if they built it somewhere it would have been lots of people worked it, but just made some not well kept. I know that. If I don't know it I feel it so strongly I still know that. But ( ) as long as their children have to get in it, you know I know that.



MM: I there anything, you've said so many positive things about the results of integration, and I wonder if there's anything you would look back and say was better under segregation that it is under integration?

AT: I guess I got a little bias in me. Now, I've heard so many issues on what's better, but I never agreed with nothing I've heard.

They tried to make an issue out of hauling children. Well, it would be better for children not to have to ride so far, but let me tell you something. When they were segregated they was riding for to keep segregated. They wouldn't go to the black school. They had to bus them all the way to the white school. I hear about six, seven, eight miles out here from where I live, and they were busing children up to Lumberton High School right there in front of my door. So that busing issue weren't nothing.

Talk about busing. That's what you've always done, bus to keep from integrating. Now they made you bus to integrate, and you want to fight it. It's just that true. You have to understand things like that.

Again, I just can't think of nothing. I can't, and I've heard so many things, but I don't know one thing I'll agree with. People right now, you can ask some blacks. They'll give you a reason why we should still be segregated, but to me I haven't got enough something in me to understand how in the world you say that because the good so much surpasses the bad until if there's anything bad, the good will cover it up. It's just been a blessing to me.

My son, do you think my son could have been public defender? Good gracious alive. He was the first black to join the Robeson County Bar.

The same lawyer I was telling you about, the school board lawyer came to me after he joined the bar here, my son, said, "Angus, we're going to make your son chaplain of the bar." They did. Said, "Yep, keep people quiet." He came and said that to me. I knew when he said it, "Man, you don't know what a fight you've got on your hands." They made him chaplain, but he's also now been president of the Robeson County Bar. All that's due to integration. I don't know anything that's bad about it. This stuff would not have happened.

MM: What did you think about school merger then that happened in the 80s? What was your impression of that movement.

AT: At the outset I was for it. I was for it. Now, I'll tell you who was against it. ( ) It was being said, and I guess there was a little truth in it at that time, the county schools wasn't as well qualified as the city schools, and I'm quite sure that they couldn't help for what Lumberton was offering and all that stuff. So we didn't have any real fight about mergers because the mass of the people were county, and the county people, they knew. I just told you. They were fighting to get their children in the city schools. That's why.

MM: Because they wanted to improve their—.

AT: They had more to offer in the city schools, more to offer than the county schools. That's why I wanted my boy in it. So, I was a hundred per cent for it even though I didn't have anybody in the county at the time. But my gracious, I had all my black people out there. It's just a matter of unselfishness. That would make the schools become more on a level.

You take right now. Wake county, I'd say even Guilford, Mecklenberg, those counties they have more finance per pupil that we—I won't say we'll ever have—they have too much more to spend for children than we do down here because it's low income. Well, it was the same thing with the city and the county. The city schools was so much more equipped than the county schools. That's one reason for the merge. They asked for the merge.

MM: Do you think it's been successful?

AT: Yes. Yes, ma'am. I really do. You can find somebody to give you a reason that they haven't, but I'll give you a whole lot that they have. Yes. It has upgraded a lot of your county schools. When you get them all in the same pot, if you're in that pot over there, and I'm in this pot, I don't know what you're doing over there, and you don't know what I'm doing. You know what's going on, and they fight for part ( ).

MM: There's one more question I had specifically, and then I wanted to see if there was anything else you wanted to say or anything else you felt like was important. But I was wondering during this whole time if you had ever felt like your work situation, your employment, was threatened in some way because of your political activity, or not threatened? Did you have experiences where people of different races that were actively supporting what you were doing and helping you? You had mentioned how somebody would come to you and say, "Well, Mrs. Thompson needs a job, and she teachers school, and don't you want to go along with this, that, and the other thing?" Talk about that a little bit if it's relevant.

AT: At that particular time—first, let me say this. I wasn't what you call selected leadership. I wasn't that. I wasn't selected leadership. If you wasn't, you were

left out. You suffer. Just like I told you, they'd fight you just like a dog. I've had them try to put the foot on my head, but I haven't been hungry yet. If you don't follow, this was the attitude. We've got a lot of that right now. If you don't follow we're going to press you to the ground. Now, that was the attitude. That's why they said, "Come on. You know your wife's got to have a job. You this and that. If you don't, we're going to put you out of business." They have tried that.

Let me tell you what. Listen, they were against my fight so much. They fought me because of my daddy. They fought my son because of me. Listen, here he is out of law school, comes to the city council, same black city councilman, to get some practice, office practice and stuff like that in the city. He's got his law degree now, and the city councilman tells my son, "Well, got nothing now but on a garbage truck." Now he's got a law degree.

MM: And offered him a job on a garbage truck?

AT: On the garbage truck. Well, now, he's got a law degree. That made him hot. At that particular time, he said, "I'll tell you what you do. If you pass the bar you come back and talk with me again." And it wasn't a week before he got his notice from the bar. He had passed it. I don't know whether he went back and showed it to him or not. If he did, and this wasn't the right attitude, but if he did, he told him what he could kiss.

[BOTH LAUGH.]

AT: So he jumps up and is going to run against him. Well, I advised him. He's young. I said, "Don't do that. Don't run against him for city councilman." I said, "You just go ahead. Get yourself good in your work and everything, your law practice, and

wait until later.” He wasn’t telling me why he wanted to run against him, but I knew. He said, “I’m going to run.” I said, “Well, if you’re going to run, I’m going to help you.” So he got out there and run. I was going to his campaign meetings, debates and things. I felt sorry for him at the time. His old head was calling him anything he-- But that was good for him. That’s made him strong. It made him better. I always considered my daddy ( ). I don’t care what you got.

Unselected leadership, they was trying to press you to the ground. But I came up on my grand daddy’s farm. I never had to really work, stoop for these white folks. It was in my Daddy, it was just in the blood. I never did much bending.

I’ll never forget one day. My mamma got scared for me because I kind put— I was in my teens. I heard somebody coming through the house, and he was a white man. He done come in the front door, coming down the hall. Nobody asked him. And I got up and was going to put him out. I don’t know why. If I came to your house I came to the back door. My grand daddy used to send me to white folks to borrow some bread-- and I had to go to the back door. And them dogs-- They’d look out the window, “Don’t hit him. He ain’t no ( ). Don’t hit him.”

MM: Man.

AT: All that stuff. That’s what I said. Here’s this man, walk down through this house just like it’s yours. But my mamma told me. I did get a bit scary. She told me, “She said son, don’t talk to these white folks like that. Bless their souls.” She was right. “You’ll find yourself hanging up in a tree out there.” God has just been good all the time.

You take even my daddy. She was teaching down in Fairmont. Now listen to this. My mamma was teaching down in Fairmont. Littlefield was superintendent down

there. He fired—he released her—I'll say fired my mamma or released her unjustly, and daddy sued the school board, and they had to pay her for the time that she was out of work and then hire her. He was a fighter.

Now, after he did that I'll never forget one night. There was two black men came to our house and they was wanting to know the way to Bertha Singletary's. Bertha Singletary's. It was kind of late at night. My daddy had his shoes off and everything. He went to the door and he met them and told them how to get there. All they had to do was go straight down the road, but for some reason they couldn't understand. And he came back to where we were to get his shoes. My mamma said, "V.J., what do you think your doing?" He was known as V.J. He said, "I'm going to show them. They're trying to go to Bertha Singletary's. I'm going to show them." My mamma said, "V.J. you'd better watch what you're doing out there. You know you just sued that school board down there." My daddy went back there to those country people and said, "I don't"--. It wasn't fifteen minutes, oh Lord. A black man came in. He came to us and said, "The Klu Klux Klan's out for somebody." That was the intersection. So they stayed down there at Buster Sanchez. I said, "The Lord have mercy. The Lord good." They'd been there to get my daddy. The Lord has been good.

I never will forget when he came, Mac Legerton. Lord knows if they weren't after him. I'd get so scared for that poor man. I said, "Lord have mercy." I used to be with him a lot and do what I could. When you go against with the system you can expect retaliation. Now you can believe that. When you go against the system, the leadership, and all that stuff you can expect retaliation. But it's all been good. White folks have come and asked me, the mayor right now. He doesn't even realize. He comes to me, me

and my wife all the time to support him when he's running for mayor. I'm not even in the city.

[BOTH LAUGH.]

MM: But you have influence, right?

AT: Yeah.

MM: That's why he wants your support because you can influence the people that would vote for him.

AT: That house over there is in the city, and this one is in the city, but I'm not. Now, why am I not in the city? Because of all this stuff I've been telling you. They didn't want to deal with me because they knew I'd fight. They didn't want to deal with me.

And really what happened, after we got the school district lines drawn and all that stuff, our city councilman went to Raleigh. He didn't have to go to Raleigh. Sam Noble he took Hector McLean's place as senator in Raleigh. Now Sam Noble, me and Sam were close, but he was against a lot of things this black councilman did, and he knew I was against it. Sam would help me out here. He got the state to drain and all that stuff, but after Hector left Sam Noble was appointed as state senator to full out his term. This black councilman went up there and got him to draw up legislation to change the method of incorporating city limits, and that was because of me.

END OF TAPE ONE, SIDE B

TRANSCRIBED BY SHARON CAUGHILL, NOVEMBER, 2003.