

START OF TAPE 1, SIDE A

3/19/09

Peggy Van Scoyoc (PV): Okay, this is Peggy Van Scoyoc. Today is Thursday, March 19, 2009. I am talking from my home in Cary and I'm talking to Mr. Paul Cooper Jr. who actually is in his home in Virginia. We are recording this interview over the phone. So, we are going to be talking this evening about Mr. Cooper's life and also his father's life. His father, who was Paul Cooper Sr., was very much instrumental in desegregating the schools in Cary, and so we want to focus on that this evening. So let's start out, first of all, were you born in Cary?

Paul Cooper Jr. (PC): No, I was born in Warrenton, North Carolina in 1936. And that's, my dad was principal of the school there, which was John Graham High School. We moved to Cary in 1947. I was in the sixth grade coming up. So he was principal from 1948 through 1967.

PV: At Cary High School?

PC: Yes, Cary High School. And I think the, that started out in the old, what's now the elementary, or what they're converting to a museum or something. And they moved to the new school on Walnut Street in 1960, I think it was. And I graduated from Cary High School in 1955.

PV: In the old building on Academy Street?

PC: Yes, in the old building.

PV: You went all the way through?

PC: Yes. There were all grades there then. From there I went one year to Hargrave Military Academy in Chatham, Virginia, and then to the Naval Academy. So I was basically gone. I wasn't around, like some of the guys who stayed around, Charlie Adams and Billy Rogers and them. So I was basically gone after 1955. I was either at the Naval Academy or in the navy. My first duty was in California, so I was home, not a lot, two-week periods and all like that. So...

PV: So just short visits after that time?

PC: Yes. In fact, I'm not sure, when was the law passed for integration, what year?

PV: The, was it Brown vs. the Board of Education was in 1954, but they didn't really enforce the laws until 1970. But Cary implemented their plan to integrate Cary High School in 1963. So they were one of the first.

PC: Yes. I think '63 was the marches in Selma and all, because I was in Westpac, what they called Westpac which is the Western Pacific and I remember reading it in the paper. Then I was, I served three tours flying from aircraft carriers in Vietnam from '65 through '73, the end of the war. So what I know is just basically what I've heard. I don't, do you want me to go into it?

PV: Sure, yes. So your father was already principal, and...

PC: Yes, he was principal, and my brother, who as passed away now, but he was two years behind me in high school. He stayed around there. He could have probably helped you, but. Daddy was principal, he was principal the whole time until he retired in 1967. I heard most of it, he wasn't one to talk a lot and tell me stuff that was going on because he didn't... Mother I got a lot of it from Mother, but there didn't appear to be any problems that I knew of or heard of in integrating the schools. And I know, Mr. Adams was chairman of the school board, I think. He and Daddy got, I remember Mother telling me, they wanted a head start on it. They wanted to do it the way, they could see it coming and thought it would be best if they did it their way instead of waiting for it to be mandated, and then all of a sudden here they come and there's no plan for it, type of thing.

PV: So they got together, the two of them to start putting the plan together?

PC: Well, I'm not sure. They, and there was an advisory team from the city of Cary. I just know that they came up with a plan, I think, to start. There weren't many blacks in the school district at the time, that I know of. Most of them were across the line in Raleigh, I think. But, there just weren't many there. And they had a plan to slowly integrate it, a few at a time. I'm not sure when it started.

And then there was also a plan to, I heard this and it sounded like a good idea, to make the ninth grade the first grade where when they first all came in, and do it at another school like an elementary school or something. Make that the ninth grade for all whites and blacks that were coming to Cary High School for the next year. They did that, as far as I know. I don't think there was any problems with it, but it gave them a chance, the blacks and the whites, to get to know each other and play ball together and study together, or do whatever they wanted to do, before they came to Cary High School, which would have been the new high school down there, all in one big group. As far as I know it went, I'm sure there may have been incidents, but there wasn't anything big that I know of. I didn't hear my dad talk about any problems with it or any of that stuff.

PV: Do you know if he got death threats, or if he was threatened in any way?

PC: No, I don't think he was, I didn't hear that.

PV: Okay, because Henry Adams did receive some anonymous phone calls and some notes in the mail, that kind of thing.

PC: Oh, I didn't, if he did, he didn't say anything to me about it. And I know there were some people upset, and went to talk to Mr. Adams about it at the drugstore. But they just didn't, they weren't far-sighted enough to see it was coming no matter what they thought. And this was the best way to handle it was to do it at that time under their own plan to do it. I didn't hear any death threats at all. My mother would have told me if so.

PV: Okay. Did he comment at all on what it was like to, from the principal side, watching the first black students come into his school, and as principal, carrying out that plan?

PC: No, I don't remember anything he's told me on that.

PV: I think that Cary has a lot to be proud of in that, they did integrate their schools before they had to. They did take that initiative to do it on their own. And it was successful, without any

huge incidents. And it became a model for other towns throughout the South to copy when they were about to do the same thing.

PC: I didn't know that. But, I know it was mainly Mr. Adams and my dad who were, that I knew about, from what I've heard that were pushing to do this on their own terms type thing.

PV: Do you have any idea who was involved from the Town of Cary on that Advisory Board or council?

PC: No, I'm sorry I don't.

PV: No? So it wasn't the Town Council, or...

PC: I don't know. I'm sure we had a mayor then, but Cary wasn't that big then. I'm not even sure there was a mayor. But there probably was. I don't know if there was a town council. Other than Charlie Adams, Billy Rogers might be a good person to talk to. He's been there the whole time. He might know or remember stuff like that. He's about, he's a little ahead of me. He's in Charlie's age group, I think.

PV: Okay, we can try to run some of these questions by him. That would be great. Okay, do you recall anything else that you can recall that anyone has told you, or...

PC: No, not really. I know, there were some, like some dissatisfaction with some of the white guys that were in my class who went and talked to Mr. Adams. They didn't threaten him or anything, but once it was explained to them, I think, and I think there may have been a couple of meetings to do that, once it was explained to them then they came on board somehow. I don't know that they were ever satisfied, but I think they saw in the long run that it turned out to be the best for Cary. And that was the whole idea, was to take care of the high school and Cary, and not let it get out of hand.

PV: Oh, that's good to hear. It makes sense too. Well, that's very good information and you told me some things that I didn't know.

PC: Well, I didn't have a lot of tidbits for you, but there's no one left. If my mother or brother were still here I could probably talk to them. But I was basically gone and didn't keep up with a lot of it. I was getting married about in those days and I was on the West coast. There wasn't much communication. I mean, we talked and stuff, but it was over the phone and only like once a year when I'd get some leave and come back home type thing.

PV: And you were about to head out to a war too. That's a little distracting.

PC: Yes, you were caught up in that and, you knew what was going on out there but I didn't, all you had in those days were letters to send back and forth. And no email, that kind of stuff, so I didn't get a lot of the Cary info that I would have gotten if I had just stayed around the area, and done something there. I came back to the East coast in '73. I moved, we went to Newport, Rhode Island. And then from there we moved down to Virginia Beach and were on the East coast the rest of my naval career. So I got down there pretty much then, but...

PV: And that's where you are today.

PC: Yes.

PV: Well very good. I really appreciate you're taking the time tonight to tell me what you know and what you remember. This is helpful to us. I have a, I'd like to send you a release form that gives us permission to use what you told me. And so I'll mail that off. And if you happen to have an extra snapshot of yourself, I'd love to have it. We try to get pictures of everyone we talk to.

PC: Okay, I can send one.

PV: That would be great. Okay, I'll send that off to you so you can get it back to me whenever. Thank you so much for taking the time.

PC: I come down there pretty much. We give an award in my fathers' name at awards day every year at the high school. That's in May. And we have sports reunions and high school reunions that I come to two or three times a year. So somewhere maybe I'll get a chance to say hello to you.

PV: That would be great. I'd love to meet you. That would be terrific. Good deal.

PC: Another person is Guy Mendenhall. He'll talk your ear off if he gets a chance.

PV: I just interviewed Guy and he was great. He gave me pretty much the whole history of the high school from 1896 all the way through. And it was wonderful.

PC: That's it. He's still up there and he's still doing stuff up there. He gets a lot of stuff done for us at the high school because he was up there and a lot of people that are up there now work for him, so they let him get away with a lot of stuff.

PV: He seems like he is Mr. Cary High School. He's just so dedicated. It was wonderful.

PC: They give an award in his name up there too. He presents it every year.

PV: That's good to hear. That's great. They just had a special award for Doug Holloman.

Did you hear about that?

PC: Yes, and I wasn't able to make it. I had something going on up here. I would have liked to have made it. He is really one fine guy. He really is. He's been a big part of Cary and the church there and the school, and with my family. So I'm sorry to have missed it. But I saw him a couple of weeks later and talked to him.

PV: We'll have to try to see if we can sit down with him one of these days.

PC: He would be a good guy, yes. He'd be nice. He would be willing to do it too. He'd give you some good stuff. Sorry I don't have a lot of stuff on the integration thing.

PV: That's okay. You did your best and you gave us some good information, so I really appreciate that. Okay, thank you again so much, and I'll be sure to get a package off to you in the mail.

PC: Thanks, Peggy.

PV: Thank you.