

SOHP Series: Listening for a Change  
Davidson College Interviews - Lincolnton

NOTES AND LOG - WAYNE BESS

Interviewee: Wayne Bess

Interviewer: Reid McGlamery

Date: 3 May 1999

Location: Lincolnton, N.C.

Tape No.: (cassette 1 of 1)  
(approximately 60 minutes?)

Notes: Wayne Bess was a student at Lincolnton High School during the early years of school desegregation there. He was a member of the Student Relations Committee, a committee set up by black and white students to deal with some of the issues raised by desegregation at the school. He graduated in 1970.

We set up a time mid-afternoon on a Monday, for he would be not be at work then. I drove to his house in rural Lincoln county and pulled up into the drive. He was outside gardening, wearing a t-shirt that read "One in a Million." We moved into the living room of his house and I set up the recorder. He offered me something cold to drink, and then I began the interview. Going back over the interview, I noticed several points where the tape cut off. Portions of the interview are thus incomplete, but the log attempts to fill in some of those very brief gaps.

For more information on desegregation in Lincolnton, and on the relationship between white student Alan Stoudemire and black student Boyce Blake, see Alan Stoudemire, *A Place at the Table* (Atlanta, Cherokee Publishing Company, 2000).

TAPE LOG

[Cassette 1 of 1, Side A]

Question about where he grew up. He grew up in Lincoln County, about a mile from his current house. His mother still lives there.

Question about what his parents did while he was growing up. His father was a furniture delivery person and later went into textiles as a custodian. His mother did domestic work.

Asked where his parents grew up. They both grew up in Lincolnton as well, his father in the same neighborhood and his mother in town.

Question about his educational background. In the fall of 1968, he entered Lincolnton High School as a junior.

Asked where he went before that. He attended Newbold, the all black high school in the county.

Question about how he decided to go to Lincolnton. He stayed at Newbold as long as he could, but it closed down and became an elementary school. He then had no choice but to go to Lincolnton.

Question about whether he knew anyone who participated in Freedom of Choice. He had some friends who went to Newbold through eighth grade and then left for Lincolnton.

Asked if he ever thought about going through Freedom of Choice. He did think about it, but it was more convenient to go to Newbold. The bus went there, and someone would have had to pick him and his siblings up from school if they'd gone to Lincolnton.

Question about how many siblings he had. He had five brothers and three sisters. One brother was killed in a car wreck years ago.

Question about how transportation worked once he went to Lincolnton High School. The same bus that took kids to Newbold switched and took kids to LHS. The elementary school kids were dropped off first at Newbold(which had been changed to Central Elementary School), then everyone else went to LHS.

Asked how many went to Lincolnton that first year.

Approximately one third of Newbold went to LHS, while the other two thirds went to East and West Lincoln High Schools.

His first few months there, he drove a car which he had purchased the summer before. After that, he started driving the school bus and that became his mode of transportation to and from school.

Asked if he was involved in athletics. He was not, for he worked part time his junior year and full time his senior year. His junior year, he worked in the evenings at a department store in town called Ben Franklin.

Tape problems.

Question about how he got to drive the school bus. He took a class for it and had his regular driver's license. The school system hired him. His route was forty miles in the morning and evening, a total of eighty miles a day. He knew most of the kids or their brothers and sisters.

Question about how the Student Relations Committee evolved. A couple of events triggered its formation. Towards the end of the 1968-69 school year, he ran for student council president against two white students. Bess didn't win, and many black students thought the election was rigged because he didn't. They staged a walk out, but Bess didn't participate. The ballot box stuffing of the Miss Merry Christmas pageant was another event key to the initial stages of the committee's formation.

The idea of the student relations committee was to try and satisfy students with problems when the administration couldn't solve such issues. They were the "last resort effort to try to solve differences or situations that came up." Bess believes the faculty, not the administration came up with the idea.

Question about his particular role within the Student Relations Committee. All had equal say, but there were co-chairman. Gets up to retrieve his yearbook from the other room. He flips through it and realizes he was the chairman.

Asked who picked the students on the committee. The sponsors picked the students, and "the ones that were picked were picked for a purpose. And the purpose was because they probably exhibited characteristics...it was done deliberately."

Question about particular cases the committee dealt with.

Other than the ones previously mentioned, he recalls an issue with the dress code. Girls wanted to wear long pants when it was cold, so the committee proposed that girls be able to wear pants during the winter months, from November to March. They would wear skirts as dictated by the code at all other times. The recommendation was accepted by the administration.

Asked whether a recommendation was ever rejected or modified significantly. There was not such a case, for "when we made recommendations, we were pretty careful with what we came up with. We were pretty sure what we came up with would be accepted."

Question about the recommendations made for Miss Merry Christmas and student council election scandals. In the former case, a new election occurred which was closely supervised. The results of the student council elections stood, and no action was taken. They "just advised everybody to calm down and go back to class."

Asked what prompted students to presume the election had been fixed. Bess had no idea; it was a surprise to him.

Question about any tensions he noticed that first year.

"I was kind of tense, but it was only because...I guess it was a fear of the unknown, being in a new place. Any student going into a new school will be a little apprehensive, and I think that was probably the case with me and a lot of others. But as far as racial tension, there wasn't any that I could feel."

Asked whether there were any black faculty or staff when he first arrived. There were black janitorial and cafeteria staff and one black history teacher, Mr. Oliver Patterson. He got to know him later, but not immediately. He was the sponsor of the History and Sociology Clubs.

Question about how things came to the Student Relations Committee. The dress code, for example, was brought to the council by the sponsors who'd been given the complaint during a faculty meeting. The sponsors were Ms. Janet Collins and Mr. Von Ray Harris.

Question about how the meetings proceeded. The sponsors were in charge, but discussion was open. There was a secretary who took minutes. The sponsors took the recommendations to the

faculty and administration, but they did not have a vote.

Asked if there was ever any heated discussion or debate. "Not heated, no. The Student Relations Committee was pretty calm. Discussions went pretty easily, as far as I can remember."

Question about how long he was a part of the SRC. He was a part of it the latter part of his junior year and all of his senior year. Thinks about it more and believes that the Student Council election was the first incident and that the Merry Christmas Pageant came that following school year. (Von Ray Harris contests this. He believed both happened the first year of integration.)

Asked how long the Student Relations Committee lasted. Bess isn't sure. (Harris, in a later discussion, says that it lasted until fairly recently. The new principal got rid of it.)

Asked if he knew Boyce Blake and Alan Stoudemire. He knew them both but was particularly close to Blake. They were friends at Newbold. Bess doesn't recall the incident in which Blake and Stoudemire faced the KKK rally. "I was probably somewhere working," he jokingly responds.

Question getting back to the student bus drivers. All drivers were students then; doesn't recall when it switched. During his entire school career, there were student drivers. Holds up a picture of the student bus drivers in the yearbook. He was not pictured.

Asked if any experiences about bus driving stand out. He recalls driving in the snow a few times. It was a big responsibility to drive between thirty and forty kids when he was "not much more than a kid [himself]."

Question about when he'd get up in the morning to drive the bus. He would awake at 5:45 am to leave the house by 6:30. He would get the kids to school by 7:45. In the afternoon, he would drive from 3:00 to 4:30. He would go home, have a snack and then go to work. "It seemed a little quicker in the evening." Recalls it being dark when he would leave for school in the mornings.

Asked when he had time to meet with the Student Relations Committee. They met about once a week at different times during the school day so students wouldn't miss the same class too much. There was no designated time week after week.



Question about his attendance of sporting events. He attended a lot of football and basketball games his first year. He didn't drive the school bus his senior year, but he worked full time. He had enough credits to take all his classes in the morning and leave school by 1pm. He would go home, snack and then work from 3pm to 11pm at the textile mill where his father worked. He worked various jobs in the finishing department. He would wash, dry and press cloth. His father was all over the place as a custodian and errand person. He enjoyed working with his father. All three of his sisters worked there, and his oldest and youngest brother also worked there at one time.

Asked how many days he worked per week. He worked Monday through Friday, and sometimes five hours on Saturday.

Asked if he was able to attend any football games his senior year. He went to very few, but he would often get the night off or work half a shift if it were a special occasion like Homecoming, Prom or a big basketball game.

Question about any football games that stood out in his mind. Football was very big in the community. He recalls several stand out players like Bobby Joe Easter and Leroy Diamond, who was "a pretty good guy." He grew up on the west end of town and "could get along with anybody, but you just didn't want to cross him." Recalls one specific game that he selected as sports editor for a caption in the yearbook. One of his classmates blocked a field goal and ran it back for a touchdown to beat R.S. Central 10-2 his senior year.

Asked if that was a big rival. Not really, but the big rivals were Cherryville, Newton-Conover and Shelby, which remains the biggest one today.

Question if he has anything else to add relating to integration or the Student Relations Committee.

"Personally, my experience at Lincolnton High School was a good one. There were several people who made my transition from the all black institution to the integrated institution a lot easier. There were some people who actually went out of their way to be friends. That stands out in my mind more than anything else."

Asked if these were white students. Yes, some of whom he still sees on a regular basis and remains friends with.

"If you're going to quote me as saying anything in the paper, you might say that had it not been for some of the students who went out of their way to make me feel at home and be friendly with me, the transition would have been harder. And the same with the faculty. I know it put a strain on everybody being thrown together. All of a sudden there was no more choice. We had to be there. And I think the teachers handled it well. From my experience, most of the students handled it well, black and white. But there were those who went the extra mile to make, at least me, feel welcome. That's something I'll never forget."

Asked what adjectives he would use to describe the transition.

"It was tense the first couple of days from not knowing what to expect. But by the time I became a senior, it was just school. Actually, one-third or maybe half way through my junior year, it was just school. The anticipation during the summer before that was much more tense than the actual going. It was kind of hard to imagine what it was going to be like the summer before. But then when I got there and saw what it was like...it was pretty mild."

Question about when the students reached out to him. He says it took a while to get around to meet different people. He mentions several of the people he's still friends with: Charles Tipton, Terry Sanford(work together), Vivian Byers whose husband works with him.

End of interview