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Interview

with

GRACE HAMILTON

May 10, 1990

By John Egerton

Transcribed by Jovita Flynn

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START OF TAPE 1, SIDE A

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GRACE HAMILTON: I must have been there twelve or fifteen years. I've forgotten exactly.

JOHN EGERTON: Do you know about when you first took that job?

GH: I took the job in '42, I think it was, and stayed until. . . .

JE: Up in the '50s.

GH: Yeah, until just a couple of years ago.

JE: I noticed that you were on the board of the Southern Regional Council, right from the very first, 1944.

GH: Right from the beginning, I think.

JE: Were you involved with the Committee on Interracial Cooperation before then?

GH: Yes, before the Council.

JE: You were involved in it, too?

GH: Yes, I was a member of that.

JE: Did you go to that Durham Conference in 1943?

GH: No, I didn't go to that.

JE: Was there any particular reason why you didn't go?

GH: No, it just wasn't convenient at the time.

JE: Just didn't work out. Then they had the meeting here. There was a group of whites who met here first, and then they had another meeting in Richmond where some people from both of those two meetings, kind of delegates, went together. Did you by any chance go to that?

GH: I didn't go to that either.

JE: Then they had another meeting back in Atlanta, and that's when they drew up the charter.

GH: That's right. I was in that meeting.

JE: You were involved in that. Ralph McGill was the chairman of those first efforts--the first Atlanta meeting that was white people and then the later Atlanta meeting when it was whites and blacks.

GH: Oh, he was?

JE: Yes, but then he disappeared from all of this, and I'm real curious to know why he didn't continue his involvement with the Southern Regional Council.

GH: He probably was just busy.

JE: You think that's all it was?

GH: I think that's all it was.

JE: Didn't have to do with any disagreement about direction?

GH: No, I don't think so.

VISITOR: Was he the editor of the Constitution at that time?

JE: Yes. He was already the editor.

GH: No, I don't think there was any disagreement about fundamental direction.

JE: You felt like he was pointed in the right direction?

GH: Yes, he was a friend and wanted to further the right efforts.

V: I wasn't here in those years, so I'm not able to give you much input.

JE: Right at the very beginning of SRC, I think even in the very first general membership meeting which would have been in December of 1944, there was a debate over what the Council's position ought to be on the issue of segregation. One group of people said, "Segregation is what the problem is in the South and we need to stand four square against it, right from the first." Another group said, "Well, I agree with that, but if we do that, we're going to lose all of this white support that we need, and we'll be ineffective and so it will come to naught," and they had a big argument. Do you remember that?

GH: No, I wasn't in the group then. I mean, I wasn't in it enough to follow that.

JE: Does that debate over what's the right strategy for the 1940's give you any feeling about where you might have stood on that?

GH: Oh, I'm sure I would have been with the ones who were four square against segregation.

JE: And it seemed to me that almost all of the blacks were in that position.

GH: Yes, I would think they'd have to be.

JE: But a great many of the whites were not.

GH: I know that.

JE: I want to just mention some names to you and get some sense from you of where you felt they stood on this issue at that time. Virginius Dabney.

GH: I didn't know him well enough to make a judgment.

JE: Charles S. Johnson.

GH: Oh, he was on the right position. He would have been with the integrationists.

JE: He was a pretty important person to all this, don't you think?

GH: Yes, a very important person, and very good friend of mine.

JE: Guy Johnson.

GH: Guy Johnson, I think would have been with the right group too.

JE: Howard Odum.

GH: And so would Howard Odum.

JE: Will Alexander.

GH: And so would he be. Those last three white people were people that were misunderstood greatly.

JE: Why do you think they were? What do you think it was about their position that people didn't understand?

GH: Well, the white people didn't have any patience with anybody that seemed to be favoring the abolition of segregation. I think that was it. So they just turned thumbs down on them because they thought they were on the wrong side of the fence.

JE: Then on the other hand, there would have been some people who would have said that they were dragging their feet.

GH: That's right.

JE: So they're kind of caught in the middle there.

GH: Yeah, they were.

JE: The same as some blacks were caught in the middle. If they were not militant enough on the issue and wanted to take more aggressive action, then a lot of people dumped on them, and other people said they were going too far. Everybody seemed to get caught in the crack, didn't they? What about Lillian Smith?

GH: I knew her pretty well.

JE: What did you think about her? She didn't have much to do with SRC.

GH: No, but she was always in the right position. She was always a woman who just went on her own way. Regretted if people didn't understand, but that didn't upset her.

V: What was one of the books she wrote?

JE: She wrote a novel called Strange Fruit, which was about an interracial romance.

V: Right, I was trying to remember the name.

JE: And then she wrote a wonderful book called Killers of the Dream. It was a non-fiction book, and I thought that was one of the best books I'd ever read about the South.

GH: And a real contribution at the time it came out.

JE: 1949, I believe, it came out, and it was a time when

GH: We needed some people to speak clearly.

JE: Needed badly for somebody to make those kinds of statements. And I had a feeling--now, you tell me if I'm wrong about this--that at that time, SRC had not really come to grips with that.

GH: I think you're probably right.

JE: They weren't yet ready to make the kinds of statements that she was making.

GH: Hard and fast, no, they weren't. They were moving toward that.

JE: They were trying to get there, but it was a slow process.

GH: They hadn't gotten there yet.

JE: There were people, of course, individually at SRC who had those feelings, like Mrs. Tilly and George Mitchell.

GH: That's right.

JE: I never had a feeling that they didn't believe in that, but they didn't--and I don't want to say they were afraid either.

GH: No, it was just that that was not their way of work.

JE: And they didn't want to lose. That's what I really want to say.

GH: And they didn't want to lose what they had.

JE: They didn't want to take a position and say, "Here's where we are, and we're going to make this happen," and then get run over with a steam roller and not be able to fight any longer.

GH: That's right.

JE: That would have been a big loss.

GH: I'm sure that was their feeling. They didn't want to cut off the support they had by being too. . . .

V: Wasn't he a leader in SRC, Mitchell?

JE: Right, he was the director for a long time. He even loaned a lot of his own money to SRC.

GH: Did he? In the very early days?

JE: Yes, in the days when the money was hard to come by. He didn't take his paycheck sometimes too.

V: Was he a southerner?

JE: He was. He was from Virginia, I think. SRC had a hard time getting money and support, did it?

GH: In the early days. They had a few faithful friends, but it was really hard to come by.

JE: Which I guess is a way of saying that the white South, the money in the South, was still on the side of segregation, and it was really hard to generate any kind of a movement away from segregation at that time.

GH: Oh, it was.

JE: Still and all, Mrs. Hamilton, when I look back on that time, it seems to me that 1945 to 1950 was about the last chance the South had, maybe the only chance it ever had, to kind of fix its own social wagon. You know what I mean?

GH: I think you're probably right. That was the time.

JE: That was the time. And when they couldn't accomplish that by 1950-1-2, and all of the communist stuff was going on, and all of the. . . .

GH: They missed the boat.

JE: It was too late. It took twenty-five years of turmoil then. . . .

GH: To overcome.

JE: To get us to where we are.

GH: I agree with you. I think that's a very. . . .

V: When you're saying twenty-five years, you mean from the '40s to the '60s?

JE: Right. In other words, if those people could have somehow persuaded the South, "This is what we need to do, and we're ultimately going to have to do anyway. So why don't we figure out a way to do it now?" Then they could have avoided having to go through all the killings and the bloodshed and the pain and agony and turmoil to get exactly where we ended up, where we would have been then. And in some ways, we would have been a whole lot farther down the road than we are now.

GH: That's right.

JE: But you know, maybe things just have their own time to happen, and there wasn't any way to speed that up.

GH: You can't really manage history.

V: I think as far as human relations goes it's a long haul.

JE: It's still a long haul.

V: Well, it is but so many impressions and ideas, and very it's inheritance, I think, from familial settings and communities. They want to carry on the same old patterns. Those are hard to break. Not that you need to break some of them, but those that. . . .

JE: The ones that you do, you need to break them bad. Another sort of impression that I think I'm coming to when I study this time is that the major institutions in society failed at that point. The church, if you look back in the '30s and even in the early '40s, you can hear expressions of white Baptists and Methodists and Presbyterians and Episcopalians in the South

saying we need to do right by our colored brethren. And by the time 1950 came along, you could hardly hear those voices at all. And early on the universities, like the University of North Carolina when Frank Porter Graham was there, was a great liberal institution, and by the time he went off to the Senate and then got beat, that place got quiet and it stayed quiet for twenty-five years.

GH: That's right.

JE: And the press was that way. There was a time in the '30s when little newspapers like Macon and Savannah and small daily papers around the South were saying we need to do better than this. We need to make some changes.

GH: (?)

JE: And then they got quiet. I'm thinking just at the time when it was crucial to have a sort of institutional framework that would support a movement like this, it wasn't there.

GH: Everybody drew back.

JE: They disappeared.

V: Why do you think that is? You think it was lack of money? Well, the war was in there for a period of time.

GH: People are fundamentally timid, I think.

JE: I think that's got a lot to do with it.

V: What?

JE: People are fundamentally timid. They don't like confrontation and they don't like unpleasantness and they don't want to have turmoil. I think they saw. . . .

GH: They want to be on the side of peace.

JE: They want peace, sometimes at any price.

GH: Want to be on the side of peace.

JE: And I think people just got frightened. They heard people saying, "If you believe in integration, you must be a communist." And when you heard that kind of stuff, people just sort of got quiet. They just quieted down.

V: Go in the closet and hide.

JE: And that makes me think of the old Southern Conference for Human Welfare. Remember that organization? That started in Birmingham in 1938. They had 1500 people at the first meeting of that, including some governors and senators, lot of church people, and university people. And about 500 out of the 1500 were black. And within six years they were being called a communist organization, and they could have had their convention in a telephone booth.

GH: That's right.

JE: They got branded with that label.

GH: That's right, and that held on for many a day.

JE: Sure did. The Highlander Folk School was another place.

GH: Oh yeah, I was on that board from the very beginning.

JE: You were on the Highlander board?

GH: Yes.

JE: Is that right?

V: What's the man, just died?

JE: Myles Horton, just died.

GH: Was a good friend of mine. You say he just died?

JE: Yes, he just died just a few months ago.

GH: I don't think I realized that.

[Interruption]

V: Southern Conference of Human Welfare, that's the one you were speaking about.

JE: Right. Organized in Birmingham.

GH: Got branded by the right as very leftist.

JE: Really did. Aubrey Williams was in there. You remember him?

GH: Yeah.

JE: And Clark Foreman.

GH: Clark Foreman, that's right.

JE: Those were people you knew, I bet?

GH: Yes, I did. I knew Clark Foreman better than I did. .

JE: He was from Atlanta, I believe?

GH: Yeah, he was.

JE: In fact, I believe he was a nephew of old, the guy who owned the paper.

GH: I think he was.

JE: Who was a real conservative man, wasn't he?

GH: He was something. I don't think he was as conservative as a lot of people branded him. He had a good mind, and that's always a handicap sometimes.

JE: One other thing I want to see if you can remember. In 1951, after SRC had gone for seven years without ever making a specific policy statement against segregation, a special committee was appointed. You were one of the members.

GH: Was I?

JE: To draw up a new policy of SRC that would make a statement against segregation.

GH: I remember the episode, but I don't remember anything about what happened really.

JE: Well, you did. There was a group. Charles Johnson was the chairman, and you were there, and Albert Dent.

GH: I remember being on it, and I remember these other people that were working with it, but that's all I remember.

JE: You all came out with a statement that did finally put SRC on record as being opposed to segregation.

GH: That's right.

JE: That was in 1951.

GH: That was the first time in I don't know when, and a lot of people didn't like that.

JE: Even then, there still were people who felt. . . .

GH: That wasn't necessary.

V: What year was that, '51?

JE: '51. I mentioned Virginius Dabney? He resigned over that.

GH: Did he? I remember that he was one of ones. . . .

JE: That went too far for him. And here's a guy who wrote a book in 1932 called Liberalism in the South, and twenty years later. . . .

V: Backed out.

JE: He felt like it was going too far. So you see there was this sliding down hill there.

GH: Sliding down hill.

JE: Went on. And it kept on until finally 1954, the Brown decision, and '55, the Montgomery bus boycott, and then the civil rights activity that just started up right about then. I think it took the protests of blacks in the South, and it took the court decisions of the U.S. Supreme Court to make it happen. And if it hadn't been for those two things, we'd still be sitting around waiting for these people to. . . .

V: I think you're right about that.

JE: Change their mind.

GH: I think you're probably right about that. It was very slow.

JE: Did it cause you to lose faith in people?

GH: No, 'cause all the people that I had had been my friends before. This wasn't my first contact. My relationship with them was not, this was not the first episode. So you know, friendship lasts, doesn't it? It doesn't rise and fall on that kind of. . . .

JE: You'd have been perfectly in your rights, I think though, if you'd said, "Look here, now, I'm getting sick and tired of this."

GH: Yeah, I'm sure of it. A lot of people didn't understand how you could put up with it. How you could put up with the whites' slowness.

JE: Yeah, it's incredible. It's hard to believe, really.

GH: Yeah, it certainly is. It makes you appreciate all the more how far the South has come, because it certainly has moved from those days.

JE: It has. You know, there's no getting around that. I still don't think it's moved nearly far enough, but it sure has come a long way.

GH: It's like another place.

JE: It is like another place in a lot of ways.

GH: And I think there are a few more voices on really the right side.

JE: Oh yeah, I think so too.

GH: They may not carry much weight, but they're still there.

JE: I know that McGill got some criticism later on for not having come around to this position.

GH: I know he did.

JE: You know, after the Brown decision, he was as courageous as anybody. He took a lot of heat after that.

GH: That's right. But he was really criticized before that, and I guess to some extent afterwards. People didn't understand him.

JE: Did you ever say anything to him about it back in those days before?

GH: I don't remember that I ever spoke to him about it directly. I didn't have any sympathy for the people who were so against him.

V: He was really a pretty good editor, though, wasn't he?

JE: Yeah, he was that.

GH: And he was a good influence.

JE: And even in those years when he would not take a position on segregation, he'd light into Herman Talmadge with both fists flying.

GH: Yes, (?)

JE: It wasn't that he was on that side. I never would want to suggest that.

GH: No, he never was.

JE: It was just that he couldn't. . . .

GH: He couldn't go the whole horse.

JE: No, he couldn't. He kept saying, "We need to work this out ourselves, and it's not going to do to get federal laws passed, and all this Truman civil rights program and all that business. We'll work it out ourselves." And then there'd be another lynching and. . . .

GH: And everybody would turn on him.

JE: Everybody'd turn on him and say, "Well, you know, you're partly responsible for all of this." You remember that terrible lynching over at Monroe?

GH: I remember the name.

JE: Killed four black, two couples were murdered by a group of people.

GH: Yes, I remember the episode.

JE: That was in the summer of '46. And Ralph McGill had been writing editorials all summer long, attacking the Klan and attacking the lynchers and all that, but saying, "We're getting

better. We're going to work this thing out, and we don't have that kind of trouble like we used to."

GH: And then that came along.

JE: And then, bang, that happened. It was awful. And old Talmadge, Ellis Arnall is somebody else I wanted to ask you about. What did you think of him when he was governor?

GH: I thought he was a good governor. I thought he did all he thought he could do.

JE: He seemed to go farther than just about anybody had before or since up until Jimmy Carter.

GH: That's right. He was a misunderstood man, greatly misunderstood.

JE: He got a lot of flak from conservative whites. But he was still governor when that happened, and he was out of the state, and I think it just tore him to pieces. He just didn't know what to make of it.

V: This lynching occurred in Georgia?

JE: Right over here in Monroe.

GH: The lynching was in Monroe County, Monroe, Georgia, rather.

JE: Then old Talmadge said, "Well. . . ."

GH: I told you so.

JE: He pretty much said it was Ralph McGill's fault and Ellis Arnall's fault. The guy's too much. I guess I'm going to go out and talk to him one of these days.

V: Talmadge? [Laughter] It should be interesting?

GH: Yeah, that would be interesting.

JE: I got some questions I want to ask him.

V: Where did you grow up?

JE: I was born down here at Crawford W. Long Hospital. But my Daddy was a traveling salesman, and we lived here for thirty days. I spent all my childhood in Kentucky, in a little small town in Kentucky.

V: That's where, what you call it, Katherine said she went for a family reunion. Yeah, that should have been interesting.

JE: When I was a little kid, maybe twelve or thirteen, Katherine came from North Carolina to spend the summer in this little town where I lived. Her mother and my grandmother were sisters, and she had never been to the town where her mother came from, where she grew up. She married a preacher and they went away and had a family, and Katherine was the oldest of that family. She came back that summer in '47 or '48 to see the place where her mother had come from. And we all fell in love with her, and we just kind of adopted her, you know. She was our cousin. I've stayed in touch with her ever since.

V: All these years. Isn't that interesting.

JE: In fact, she and my mother began the closest friends. They were just about the same age.

V: Like sisters?

JE: Yeah. That was the first time they had ever met, was that summer, and they just. . . .

GH: Katherine was right here during the thick of all of these things. She always had friends on the right side.

V: She's a pretty versatile person, too, isn't she?

JE: Yeah, she was a secretary at SRC and treasurer, and then she worked for the YWCA for a long time.

GH: She went to the Y back in the days when I first worked for the Y.

JE: She's done a lot of things.

V: She was telling this story about the woman who's with the National Council of Negro Women now, who used to be at the Y.

JE: Dorothy Height?

V: Right. Little personal incidents with her [laughter], rather funny you know.

JE: Katherine's got a great sense of humor.

V: She has. And to remember all those, really insignificant, but little anecdotes, you know. Does she do any writing herself?

JE: No, not much. I wish she would.

V: She'd have some interesting things to say.

JE: She has a brother who makes movies, makes documentaries.

V: Yeah, she spoke of him.

JE: He traveled a lot.

GH: (?)

JE: I don't think she ever does, no.

GH: I don't think she does, but she's in touch with her brother.

JE: Yeah, she stayed in touch with him. He worked for Gunnar Myrdal. You remember the Myrdal study back in the early '40s.

GH: Yes, yes.

JE: He did a lot of field work for him that summer. Well, that's mainly what I wanted to talk to you about.

GH: Well, it's been a great pleasure to see you.

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A

END OF INTERVIEW