

Interview

with

WILLIAM MOORE BRAWLEY

May 12, 2006

by Elizabeth Gritter

Transcribed by Laura Altizer

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

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## Transcript – William Moore Brawley

Interviewee: William M. Brawley  
Interviewer: Elizabeth Gritter  
Interview Date: May 12, 2006  
Location: Charlotte NC, at his home  
Interview note: I was not able to follow up on the proper spellings of some of the words because of time constraints (Elizabeth Gritter, editor of transcript).

ELIZABETH GRITTER: We can take a break at any time or whatever. So the 12<sup>th</sup> today, right. The 12<sup>th</sup>. This is Elizabeth Gritter interviewing Bill Brawley on May 12, 2006 in Charlotte, North Carolina. Would you say your name so we can see how [the tape recorder is] picking up?

BILL BRAWLEY: Bill Brawley.

EG: Okay, that's great. With your, is it Bill or William?

BB: It's William.

EG: Do you have a middle name?

BB: Moore.

EG: How do you spell that?

BB: M-O-O-R-E.

EG: Is there a suffix at all?

BB: Hmm?

EG: Do you have a suffix like junior, senior, the third?

BB: No.

EG: What's your date of birth?

BB: January 24<sup>th</sup>, 1935.

EG: Were you born in Charlotte?

BB: I was born in Charlotte, have lived here all my life.

EG: And your wife's name is Midge.

BB: Is Barbara Wilson.

EG: Barbara. Midge is your nickname.

MIDGE BRAWLEY: Yeah.

EG: Okay. Do you have any children?

BB: I have two.

EG: And their names and years of birth.

BB: Oh let's see. Martha Ann was born in April the 3<sup>rd</sup> of 19—

MB: '68.

BB: '68.

EG: What was the name again?

BB: Martha Ann.

EG: Oh Martha Ann.

BB: Martha Ann McConnell now.

EG: Is it with—

MB: Two words.

EG: Okay.

MB: No E on the Ann.

EG: Then how do you spell her last name?

MB: M-C-capital C-O-N-N-E-L-L.

EG: Okay, then your other kid.

BB: It's William Moore the second. That's Sugar [the cat] knocking on the door.

EG: Oh okay. Born--

BB: He was born in 1970 on June—

MB: July.

BB: July the 9<sup>th</sup>.

EG: July the 9<sup>th</sup>. And what's your educational experience?

BB: I have a high school education.

EG: From where?

BB: Charlotte Tech High School.

EG: Charlotte Tech High School.

BB: Same class as Parks Helms.

EG: I don't know Parks—

BB: Chairman of the board of county commissioners.

EG: Oh, okay.

BB: Same year, a different high school as Jim Black, speaker of the house.

EG: Oh really. So you went to school with a lot of people who went on to distinguished ( )  
). And so did you get your diploma in '57?

BB: '54.

EG: '54, yeah, '54, that's right. Then occupational experience. Did you serve in the military at all?

BB: I was in the military. I went to Charlotte College for one semester and got drafted into the Army due to my great academic performance at Charlotte College.

EG: Where were you in the Army?

BB: I was an MP at—

EG: So was my dad actually.

BB: At Killeen, Texas.

EG: When were you there?

BB: I went in in 1955, and I got out in 1957. I went to Killeen I guess in August of '55. I was, went through camp, I mean, Fort Jackson, South Carolina basics training and military police school at Camp Gordon and then went to Killeen.

EG: Where is Camp Gordon?

BB: Augusta, Georgia. It's Fort Gordon now.

EG: Someone I interviewed yesterday was at the same places. Jim Ross. Do you know him at all?

BB: Jim, the black, yeah. I know Jim.

EG: Yeah. I think it was him or maybe it was Napoleon Chisholm.

BB: I know Napoleon too.

EG: Then what did you do when you, in terms of occupation when you got done with the Army?

BB: Well, I went on the fire department. See I worked for the city water department for, I wrecked my car and had to have a job. So between the time I got out, but I went on the fire department shortly after that, in '59, '58 rather.

EG: '58. Did you start out as a firefighter?

BB: [Indicates yes.]

EG: And you said you were working before then for the city water department.

BB: Yes, worked eleven months there I think.

EG: From '57 to '58.

BB: Yes.

EG: What was your title with that?

BB: I didn't have a title.

EG: Okay, just employee. Then did your, with the fire department did you stay a firefighter your whole life or did you change in terms of—

BB: I became an engineer, which is a driver, and I became a captain but as far as being a firefighter, yes, I was on a fire truck my whole career.

EG: Wow. How long did you work for the fire department?

BB: Thirty years.

EG: So to '88.

BB: '87.

EG: '87 and you said you were an engineer and a captain. When were you an engineer?

BB: Oh I made engineer, let's see '87, '89 I became an engineer and—

EG: '89?

MB: '89?

BB: Not '89—

MB: '59.

BB: '59.

EG: Oh '59.

BB: I became an engineer about a year after I went on the department and then—

EG: How long were you an engineer?

BB: I'm trying to think when I made captain. About 1970.

EG: Then were you captain until you retired.

BB: Yeah.

EG: Okay. You were saying—

BB: Well, we had another rank in there--that the module commander, which you were still a captain. It was just a respons—a change of responsibility. You were, you had three other companies that you were responsible for the manpower and manning and vacation times and all that. But that's not—you're still a captain. You were still a captain.

EG: I just meant like also marginal commander.

BB: Yeah, module commander.

EG: Modular.

BB: It meant you had three other companies assigned to you. Of course I was at Number One and my module was all in my, in house.

EG: Was that the, did that start after you became a captain?

BB: Oh yeah. I mean you had, that's was just a captain, when they did the rearranged the shifts, that was how they did the timecards, made out-- Had the payroll made and the vacation assignments assigned ( ) is what he does.

EG: Okay, sure. So when did you start as that?

BB: I have no earthly idea.

EG: Okay, that's all right. Then you were saying you were head of the ACLU here, or chairman of the ACLU.

BB: Yes, I served one term as chairman of the ACLU, and I have no idea when that date. It's been a while back.

EG: Do you think it was like in the '70s or '80s?

BB: I'd say it's probably in the '80s. Yeah, I'm sure it was.

EG: And you were involved with the Central Labor Council.

BB: I became actually president of the Central Labor Council before I became president of the Firefighter's [union], and I don't know, remember the exact date of that either.

MB: You might have that date on the wall. Let me look, give you some idea.

EG: Then you were president of the Firefighter's Union.

BB: I served six years, three terms as president of the Firefighter's, was out two terms, and then got stuck with it again for two more terms.

EG: Wow, so three terms. How long are terms?

BB: Two years. I was president for six years, but I was on the board for practically thirty years because I'd been a vice president.

EG: So you served a total of five terms with the Firefighter's Union.

BB: Yes.

EG: So two years, and then that was in the '60s, would you remember the—

BB: No.

EG: With being head of the firefighter's union.

MB: We were married '63, and you were—

BB: No, '63 I wasn't.

MB: No, Martha Ann was born in '68, and you were in court so somewhere between '63 and '68.

BB: No, I wasn't president. I wasn't president when we were in court.

MB: You weren't.

EG: Were you president before then?

BB: No.

EG: After that?

BB: Yes. Somewhere—

MB: The labor council you had your thing in here was presented in 1990. So was that at the end of it, the recognition?

BB: Yeah, but I was elected in 1970—I stayed as president of the labor council for a long, long, long time. From about 1970 to what?

MB: The '80s I'm sure. We should get you some—

BB: Way too--

EG: Then you became president of the Firefighter's Union after '60—did you have a title with the, before then, before you became president?

BB: Yes, I was the vice president before that.

EG: So—

BB: I was vice president in sixty—we got our charter. See we, that's a somewhat of a complicated process. We formed, we were, in 1958 when I went on the fire department, you joined a union. But in 1959 the state of North Carolina said we could not belong to a union. So in 19—we converted that to an association. Well, now I'm a rookie. I'm green as grass. I'm one of three hundred and something other firefighters and one of the youngest. So I'm not involved in any decision-making processes here at all. In '62 I think, we converted in '59. We converted that union to what we called the Firefighter's Association and gave up our ties to the International Association of Firefighters, which was a member of the AFL-CIO, the whole union thing. It became a purely local organization. Well, in '62 Bill Veder had come here as city manager, and Bill Veder said it walked like a duck, it quacked like a duck, it swam like a duck, it must be a duck. So he declared that association a union and banned it. The city council passed a resolution saying that no three firefighters could get together and discuss wages, hours. Well, you know, basically we knew that was blatantly unconstitutional, but in about '60 and I'm not sure. This sort of evolved. It's a process that where did it start. Nobody knows. But we had a meeting somewhere in the mid sixties, '66, '67, somewhere along in there, '66 I'm sure, [when] one guy hired a lawyer, Jesse Atkins. He, that suit is primarily called the Atkins [*Atkins v. City of Charlotte*]. Although the rest of us were all listed. If you look at the court documents, all of us are listed, but he and they formed an organization they called the Firemen's Assembly and basically dared the city, what are you going to do about it? Well, the city wasn't going to do anything about it. They didn't do anything except tell the city council members that they ought not to meet with us, but some of them still met with us.

EG: So were you part of the Fireman's Assembly?

BB: Oh yes. I was part of it, but it was later on that I became, I became a vice president of that.



EG: So that was, the Association they said you couldn't do, and then you formed this Fireman's Assembly.

BB: Well, see there was a time, there was a gap between '62 and probably '66 or '67. I'm not exactly sure when this other, when they started. There was a gap in there that we didn't have anything. Nothing was, but all of this, everybody was still, there were still people there that wanted to file suit to get the union back. There were some-- So the start of that process and we hired a lawyer, and I can't remember his name. But when the city didn't do anything, we decided we needed to do something, and he says, well, I'm not prepared to do that. There's a young lawyer here that probably will do it, and he was Julius Chambers. At that time we were an all-white fire department. There was no integration in the fire department. Chambers told us he would take the case, and we agreed to hire Chambers. We got called into a meeting up there with some of our chiefs and some of the personnel people and told to get rid of the "nigger lawyer" or they would hire them here. I mean it was that plain. We told them, of course, now this sounds like we were some pioneers in civil rights. There wasn't anybody up there with us that didn't know that this lily-white fire department wasn't, was on borrowed time. This could not last.

EG: You said borrowed time.

BB: Yes. We knew that they were going, it was going to be integrated. It was, this was in the '60s. This was going to happen. We told them, you do what you've got to do. We'll do what we've got to do, and we kept Chambers as a law firm, and he filed suit against the city for our right to belong. Two weeks later they hired Hazel Irvin. To make that point even more pointed, Bob Middleton who was the secretary of the local and I was the vice president. We had two vice presidents. I was one of the vice presidents. I was at Number Seven station, which was in North Charlotte, and he was at Number One. [telephone] They moved him to Seven on another shift so that they could put Hazel at One. Then they moved me from Seven to One when they didn't even have a slot for me. I was the driver, and we had, we had drivers who got X amount of dollars at that time, and we had relief drivers who got less money. They had to put me in, I was a driver drawing full pay for a driver, and they had to put me in a relief slot up there. But they put me in the same bed, in the bed right beside Hazel in the—

EG: He was the lawyer for the fire department.

BB: Hmm?

EG: Who was, I didn't, who was Hazel again?

BB: Hazel was a black guy they hired.

EG: Oh the black guy they hired.

BB: They put him, they moved Bob to make that point that what they said was true. When they hired Hazel, they moved Bob to create the slot for him at Number One. Because normally when they hire somebody like that, they go where the vacancy is. Bob was the--. Bob was the secretary of the local.

EG: Of the local. Okay.

BB: In other words at that time, this Assembly, it wasn't even, it wasn't the local then. But Hazel Irvin is as good a fireman as we ever had. There wasn't, they had turned people down. They were lucky. It was a suit fixing to happen, and only thing that saved them there was that one of our people told a black recruit that was trying to come on the fire department that blacks had a fear of heights. You know what this guy did before he had applied to the fire department? He had just got out of the military. He was a paratrooper.

EG: I was going to say, parachute, yeah.

BB: But so then the bailout was that he got a better job with Southern Bell and didn't file the suit. When they hired Hazel and I'm sure that we would've been sued even with hiring because there was a long time before there was a second one hired. That we would have been sued [telephone] had it not been for the fact that the best civil rights lawyer in the state who would probably have handled that suit, was representing the firefighters, and he wouldn't take those cases because of the conflict.

EG: How did Hazel Irvin come to be hired in the first place?

BB: Oh he was hired off the civil service list.

EG: Was there, they just knew that they had to integrate eventually or—

BB: They hired him for spite. They were going to have to integrate. They were going to do it eventually, but that hiring itself was pure spite because of us having Chambers for a lawyer.

EG: So that was directed toward you.

BB: When they tell you that, something like that and then two weeks later they hire a black, they've made their point. But they were going to have to hire him. It was going to happen anyway. It had to happen. You could, the police department had already, was already under a court--. See and that's

another thing. The fire department has never been under a court, an affirmative action court order. There's a reason for that. Chambers was our attorney.

EG: Right. Right. How you said that, what about the people like in your union that was all white? Were they all for ( ) Chambers?

BB: No. No. Look they were, there weren't, there weren't any saints involved there. None of us were saints. It was, but it was a matter that we were in pretty deep, and the city council voted to fire us, six of us. But the thing about it, Henry Underhill told them, "Well, you can fire them," said, "but they'll be back to work in the morning."

EG: Who was Underhill?

BB: He was the city attorney. He said, "They'll be back to work in the morning with a court order." This was after we had hired Chambers and after we had filed suit against them.

EG: Because they wanted to fire you because of the steps you were taking against the city for the lawsuit.

BB: That decision finally came down in 1968. In fact the real tragedy of that was that we were in court, and it was Thursday, I'm not sure of the date, it was probably Thursday that--. Chambers got that appeal to the Fourth Circuit without going through the usual court procedures. The Fourth Circuit took their positions and made a ruling on it, on the "right to belong." Of course there were some others too across the--. We were the only ones in North Carolina. We were the only state, we were the only ones that had a state law absolutely prohibiting. South Carolina has never had a state law prohibiting, but they won't recognize them. They won't, you don't exist. I don't care what you do; you don't exist. But the, the state, that decision came down in 1968.

EG: Of the circuit court.

BB: Yeah, the circuit court ruled in 1968, but we left the courtroom that day.

EG: And what was—what was the decision?

BB: Well, the decision didn't come down that.

EG: Oh—

BB: We left the courtroom, and on Friday night Martin Luther King got shot. It was the same battle. What he was in Memphis over the sanitation workers right to belong to a union in Tennessee, and

Tennessee was just like South Carolina, didn't have a law, just didn't recognize them. But the same case here's a one black and the rest of the lily white fire department suing the state of North Carolina over the same thing that [the] black sanitation workers are fighting. It's the same battle with and Martin Luther King got shot. My daughter was born the night before.

EG: Oh wow.

BB: She was born the night, we left the court. She was, she says, I had to be a lawyer. I almost ended up being born in the courtroom.

EG: She became a lawyer.

BB: Yes.

EG: Isn't that fascinating, just like all the events.

BB: You didn't go to the, you don't go to the uptown forum. Have you been to the Uptown Democrat forum? She comes to that sometimes. She's a lobbyist for Carolinas Medical Center.

EG: But that's just—that's really something having all those three—

BB: She was born the night and Martin Luther King was shot the ( ) night.

EG: And you were in court.

BB: We had been in court all that day, and of course the decision didn't come down for a couple of months. The Fourth Circuit ruled that we could, that that was blatantly unconstitutional. The city ordinance was blatant, but it also ruled that the state law was unconstitutional that had banned us in the first place. So that part of it, we got our charter, well, we got the same charter back that we had lost in '59. We had the same, in the International Association of Firefighters, ours is local 660, which 660 is a very low number. They're up in to the 3000s.

EG: So you, did it go any further than the circuit court or was that decision the--

BB: Oh it was appealed to the Supreme Court, but the Supreme Court didn't hear it. They concurred with the, the argument there was to simply concur with the Fourth Circuit's ruling.

EG: The Fourth Circuit they ruled that the state, the city council actions, law was unconstitutional.

BB: Well, basically they ruled on the state law, which would preempted the city council's ordinance. The state law prohibited us from belong to a union. They repealed the state law, which allowed us to be long to a union, to hell with the Association. We didn't have to belong to an association anymore.

EG: Right, so you could become a—

BB: Which became affiliated with the—back with the IFF, which is the International Association of Firefighters which is an AFL-CIO union. We became members of the state AFL-CIO. Now this is prior to me becoming—. I ran against one of the presidents shortly after that, the presidency of the local and lost. Most and it's a problem even when you go out here now and try to organize. If you try organize firefighters, there's place today that you could, that the sentiments there to belong to a union. The reason they don't have anybody who'll stand up and say follow me. You can't, and too often all this comes up because they're mad at the chief. That had something to do with ours. There was some play in that. And hopefully, I'd like to say I eliminated it, but I didn't eliminate it. It's still there. It's there today, but we did get away from a lot of that. We don't, you don't worry about who the damned chief is. You worry about the process of dealing with him and the process of dealing with the people who—. A lot of these locals never meet with their council. They never meet with anybody else other than—. They just hammer the chief. That's absolutely stupid. I mean you know. It's something that they won't, if you have good leadership, you'll get a union. If you don't have any leadership, I don't care how well the people want it, it won't work.

EG: So in terms, you mean meet with the council with the city council.

BB: Yeah. See you still don't have any bargaining rights. North Carolina doesn't have any process. So it's a catch as catch can, and you've got to, it's, how much guts you got and how much muscle you got. Fortunately we've had more than anybody else in the state and—

EG: You mean the firefighters or—who do you mean by we?

BB: I'm talking about the Charlotte firefighters.

EG: The Charlotte firefighters. Okay.

BB: We have been by far the most successful professional, public employees union in this state. We are paid and have been paid since back in this time we're talking about, shortly after that, well, after the city went to district representation. When the city went from—

EG: In '87.

BB: A five council to a district representation, we played a big role in that. We were active in that campaign to bring district representation here. We were active in the campaign to make the city council elections partisan.

EG: Is the reason, so that you've been then effective is because you all have done a lot of political organizing?

BB: We have done it through the political process. We have participated fully, and see at that time the civil service rules that police and firemen—[break in taping] The, we were participating. We have fully participated, and we have fully participated with the state AFL-CIO. We have been a member, we were, one of the things that I kept hounding, like I said I lost the election for presidency after we got the union back. The first time Jesse didn't want any part of that. So—

EG: Jesse Atkins.

BB: Atkins. Yes.

EG: He didn't want any part of what?

BB: Being president of the union. I never understood exactly where he was coming from or where he was going. He ended up a chief. I guess that's what he wanted to be. But not the chief but a chief. One of our chiefs.

EG: So if you could talk some more about how it came to be that you ended up being the most successful union, why that was the case and what more about—

BB: Well, we became involved with the Central Labor Council.

EG: What was—

BB: The involvement with the Central Labor—well, I had lost the presidency, and I was doing the, while I was running for president I was saying that we ought to be a member of the Central Labor Council. We ought to member. So they joined the Central Labor Council, and they said, well you're the delegate. You go to the damned meeting. Well, then I got elected president of the Central Labor Council. I think as president of Central Labor Council, I made it a whole lot more political than it had been. They had had these things, but also there was another change happening at that same time. Wilbur Hobby was elected president of the state AFL-CIO. I became what later became identified as Hobby's young Turks.



The Central Labor Council presidents had been in, most of them had been in office for years and had done nothing and nothing was happening, and Wilbur, most of them weren't forced out. They left on their own accord because Wilbur was a dynamic leader. He was wanting action, and he was wanting them to do more than they were wanting to do, and the easiest way was to leave.

EG: What is the Central, I'm not familiar with the Central Labor Council. What—

BB: Central Labor Council is all the AFL-CIO unions in Mecklenburg, in the ninth congressional district, well, it's more than that now. It's Mecklenburg, Cabarrus, Gaston, Union—I don't know if there's any unions in Union County. It's the unions that are in this area that belong to the AFL-C—. It's an AFL-CIO on the local level. The state level is the state AFL-CIO, which Hobby was president of at the time. James Andrews is president of now. But we became involved with them. Well, part of the [telephone] the A. Philip Randolph, which is a black organization, but it's financed and funded through the AFL-CIO, and of course we had a chapter here. James Andrews, I mean Jim Lawrence and Charlie Adams and these people that were active in it here, we coordinated with them and Central Labor Council. We conducted joint voter registration drives with them, and they were tied to the Black Ministers Association, which I caught some flak from my own members about my involvement in black organizations. But—

EG: Like from your members of your labor union.

BB: No, yeah. Firefighters. Like I said, we're not saints. We're a product of who we are and where we came from. It was just a matter that in most of the people who got into leadership positions saw that the key to being successful was the alliances with these organizations that, women's organizations. The first thing the city did was threaten us with hiring women. We laughed at them. Give them a set of boots and get them in here. I mean—

EG: So talk more about that. The city threatened you with hiring women.

BB: Every time you start pushing them on pay issues or something like that, the personnel department would, well, we can. They're all their little digs. It's nothing, there's nobody going to say nothing that you're going to be able to sue them over or anything like that, but they'll make those little connotations. But they finally realized that we didn't really care. If you want to—

EG: They thought it was a threat. It didn't bother you.

BB: Yeah. The threat, by the time they got around to hiring any women in the fire department, the only problem that I had with it was lower physical standards to where people could not do, they were hiring people--. They wanted to hire people who couldn't do the job. Fortunately we got most of that changed back to where, you've got to meet the minimum physical standards. We've got some, the bigots and who are always going to find fault. One of them, Tracy Auston worked for me at One, was on ladder one with me. Tracy didn't weigh, probably Tracy didn't weigh ninety pounds. But God almighty she was tough as, she rode horses on barrel races, rodeo barrel racing. She was, she had worked on a farm and handled horse trailers and all that kind of stuff all her life, ever since she--. They put her out there back in that truck in there that first time. Ladder one was a big piece of equipment.

EG: So she could handle it.

BB: Oh yeah. She could, she could probably back it in the station. They were all standing out there waiting to see her. When she first time she backed it into the station, and she didn't even have to pull up. Most of them can't back it in there without a pull up.

EG: Wow. I was wondering too how you came, like you said people some people in the firefighter's union were opposed to having Chambers and stuff. But it seems like you've been for particularly the time you were in racially progressive. You said you didn't mind working with black organizations and so forth. Have you always been that way or is that something you came to?

BB: I don't guess I was—

EG: Is that the right assessment?

BB: I have probably always realized that most of the segregation was wrong. I wasn't, and the biggest flak we got with Chambers was during the bussing thing. He was, and my answer was always the same. "Hell, that's why we hired him. He wins." But one of them one night was talking about Bill Poe who was chairman, at the time chairman of the school board and was during the bussing thing was probably one of the leading opponents of--. "We could hire him." I said, "Well, why do you want hire him? we need a lawyer that can win. You're hiring the loser."

EG: You worked with, you were saying, so the major way that you had—I just want to make sure I have this clear—have influence with the union was doing this or enacting change that you wanted with the union was through working with the political process.



BB: Yes, and it's certainly what we were doing, the power base in Charlotte was 100 percent opposed to it. We had to go out and find us some damned new friends.

EG: Then it was the alliances with black organizations, women's organizations—

BB: Anybody who was outside the system. The same thing was true with the district representation. That was a totally different group. The power structure didn't want that to happen. So you're dealing with other, and predominantly the people who were driving that were white. But they were, the somewhat disenfranchised, the neighborhood organizations who didn't think that they were properly respected, and we dealt with them. We dealt with, we dealt with everybody.

EG: Why would, with the, did you take that position with wanting district representation and that change instead of the at-large?

BB: Because we could handle that. It's when you represent, when you've got seven people representing the whole county, to beat one of them suckers is a monumental task especially if they're supported by the uptown—

EG: Business.

BB: Business situation. But you break that down in districts, we could pick one of them off. Now I'd like to say that we went out here and beat all these old dinosaurs. That's a lie. We didn't do that. We didn't beat very few of them. We wore them out. Most of them had been easy. When they would come up for reelection, they had really only token opposition if they had any opposition at all. By finding young people who wanted to run and knew people who wanted to run, we made the suckers go out and work, and some of them didn't really like that. They quit. Most of them, through retirement and but we had already, it improved our situation because we weren't involved with these people who were running.

EG: So when the system was changed from the at-large to district, did you feel you were able to get more people elected that you wanted to?

BB: Yeah. They become much and a lot of that was perception. A lot of them treated us better than they really had to. We didn't have the power that some of them imagined us having.

EG: That some of the people who were opposing you.

BB: Well, some of the people who were opposing us, some of the people who were helping get elected. We probably didn't play as big a role as they imagined that we did.

EG: How were you able then to create this perception of that they would think that?

BB: We had a lot, we had a few good people who were willing to go out and work. You could put them in organizations, and the Westside, the community, Marvin Wilson with the Westside or Marvin Smith with the Westside Community Organization. He was big ramrod behind the district representation because the Westside-- At one time the whole city council, the seven people on city council, I think six of them were members of one Sunday School class down at Pritchard Memorial Baptist Church. And the county commissioners were all members of Myers Park Presbyterian.

EG: Which is conservative establishment people kind of.

BB: Well, yes.

EG: Is that characterized—

BB: They weren't friendly to us. Let's put it that way. Now some of them were. Some of the people who were in those groups were friends of ours, and had been. One of the first things that happened here in Charlotte was when Martha Evans, one of the first political campaigns I was ever involved in was when Martha Evans ran for mayor. Martha was always a friend. When she was on council, she was always a friend of ours. When the city manager said we couldn't, shouldn't meet, she would show up in the fire station.

EG: Giving you support by trying to—

BB: Well, she had no qualms about meeting with us. When we first started the, before we hired, even before we hired Chambers, we tried to go to the state legislature. That's the first time, and I ended up working in the state legislature as a lobbyist for the firefighters for four or five years after I retired. But when we first went down there, Mickey Michaux and Jim Beatty were the only people in that building that would even speak to us.

EG: Because I mean I know in general the South is anti-union, and I mean you've really, like you said you've been going against the grain of what the culture.

BB: Sure we were.

EG: Yeah. So when you did like the political work particular influence, what were the major types of political work? I mean obviously it was helping to get—

BB: We stuffed envelopes. We put up signs. We did, it was one of the things that helped me be able to sell our agenda was that I could sit in a meeting with a candidate or something like that whether it was a steering committee for candidates and say, we can take care of that. I knew that I didn't have to take care of that. That I could walk out of that meeting, walk into my office, pick up my telephone, call Mendel, call Marvin Wilson, call somebody and say look, this is what I need done. Handle it.

EG: So you had this whole, this like—

BB: I had a network of people in addition to that a lot of white candidates because of the fact that Jim Lawrence who was president of A. Philip Randolph was also on my board as an officer in Central Labor Council. He was a district vice president for this district of the state AFL-CIO. We put him on my board—

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A

START OF TAPE 1, SIDE B

EG: Black community to the other white candidates or whites didn't have.

BB: Yes, and like I said, a lot of things aren't really what you can do. It's what the other side thinks you can do. It's what, it's perceived.

EG: Like who makes the most noise.

BB: It's not always who makes the most noise. Sometimes it's because you don't make any noise at all. That's the one key thing about politics that you have to learn when you deal with politics is that if you're dealing with a lot of people and there's a lot of people sitting around telling you how important they are and what they can do and all this kind of stuff. Half these people can't do a tenth of what they're telling you they can do. But it may be that old fool sitting down there at the corner who hasn't said a word who might can deliver more than anybody else in the whole, sitting around the table. It's keep him properly inspired. I met Jim Hunt when Jim Hunt was a green-eyed kid running for lieutenant governor who I had never heard of. Somebody called me and Hobby called me. I had just about decided not to go out there, and I'd been invited to a meeting. In fact the restaurant is the Driftwood Restaurant on Wilson Boulevard and it's rotted down and fell in now. I walk in that room and look, I'm green-eyed. I was more inexperienced than he is probably. I look around that room though, but I had a little bit of experience, and I know there's a bunch of young lawyers from Charlotte sitting around that room. But there's nobody that's

going to move a political organization, and he was here with two other guys. One of them was the pilot of the plane that flew in, a private, little hedgehopper that they flew in here on. The other guy, I didn't, he looked familiar, but I didn't know who he was. In fact Marvin Smith came in the restaurant, and somebody back there said that Hunt ought to meet--. Hunt had made his pitch, and we were standing up, had made his pitch, and they said, well, you ought to meet Marvin. So they took him outside to meet Marvin who was sitting on the table like this. I'm sitting here. The guy, older guy sitting across the table from me. He reached his hand out and said, "Bill, this train is fixing," said, "I'm Bert Bennett and this train is fixing to leave the station and if you want to be on it, tonight's the night to get your ticket punched." Well, I didn't know enough, I figured he knew some of these lawyers sitting around the table that were from Charlotte. Like I said, I didn't know Bert Bennett personally, but I knew the name. He makes governors. He made Terry Sanford. He made Bob Scott and he made, he's the of the old Kerr Scott, he's the only original of the old Haw River Gang that's still around and still in politics. Of course that's what got Meg in trouble. He's the only one, all that old Haw River Gang had gone out of existence except him, and he, when she ran for, they tried to put it back together. You can't do politics today like it was done fifty years ago, or forty years ago.

EG: So I just want to, systematically see if I can summarize what you said about the types of political work. It was meeting like with city council, city council members, running, building coalitions with other groups in terms of supporting candidates, voter registration and so forth and working to enact changes in city government like from the at-large to a district system. Creating these perceptions of having a lot of—

BB: That you'll do something.

EG: That you're going to do something even if you don't necessarily have the manpower to enact it as much as the perception as--. Were there any other kind of types—

BB: Well, see we never, we always continuously worked not only the city council but the state legislature too. We were, in some cases we had more friends in the state legislature than city government had.

EG: Interesting, so to work to change laws at the state level that would make an impact on the cities.

BB: City manager wanted to do away with our civil service rule. The city council, he flimflammed the council. It shouldn't have ever passed the council. But he somewhat flimflammed them into voting for it and Vinroot, Vinroot was for it. There wasn't any question about that, which would've made our civil service an advisory board. Right now the chief can't fire anybody. He has to ( ) civil service board. They do the hiring and they do the firing. Changing that, we don't want to change that. Through all of this that's the one thing that probably protected most of us from—

EG: From being—yeah.

BB: They would've loved to have fired us, couldn't get a board that would do it. But he was going to change that. He sent it to the state legislature, and this was after I had retired. This was in, somewhere probably '90. But when he started with the bill, I started working--. I was at that time working the state legislature as a lobbyist for the state firefighters, and for the, my local was paying half of it and the state was paying the other half. But he sent the bill, that bill arrived down there. The first place was in Ruth Easterling's briefcase, and they couldn't get it out of Ruth Easterling's briefcase, but Harry Grimmer wanted to at least put it on the agenda for the local delegation. He couldn't even get a second.

EG: The person with the city council or the state legislature.

BB: The state, it was in a committee. It was in, it was sent to the local delegation.

EG: The local delegation wouldn't second it.

BB: But and Harry Grimmer wanted to put it on their calendar to bring up and discuss, and he couldn't even get a second out of the rest of the delegation to bring it up.

EG: So this political organizing was ongoing from the time after the, when you won the lawsuit.

BB: It has to be ongoing all the time.

EG: All the time.

BB: It is always an ongoing process. If they're not doing it today, they're going to lose.

EG: So with your career with the fire department, I mean it was first it was like it seems like even after the union was allowed and there was the court battle to get back the union status. Then it was and then during, but during that time too when you were doing that, were you also doing, could you do political--. You couldn't do political organizing at that time.

BB: They—

EG: Because that would defend—

BB: The city charter is part of the state law. City charter is, and under our civil service is under, and at that time the civil service rules said, that no fireman or policeman and that's who's under civil service—[speaking to cat]. The civil service rules said you cannot engage in any political activity except exercise your franchised right to vote. Now after district representation was put in, the city council petitioned the state legislature, which they did, to change that to say that you cannot engage in any political activity while on duty or in uniform. That's a reasonable request. I mean, that's-- You shouldn't be out here with your uniform and a fire truck politicking for somebody. But when I put on civilian clothes I ought to be able to do what I want to on my time, which under that you can't.

EG: But you could do that after you gained—

BB: When the city council changed that, they referred to it as the Brawley amendment.

EG: Oh really. Well, that must've felt good.

BB: Well, I was on the state Democratic executive board too. I mean, it was, Henry Underhill said they're ready to go to court, and I'm not sure I am. So they changed it.

EG: You worked with the Mecklenburg Voter Coalition as well. That was one of the organizations that you had an alliance with or you were representative to.

BB: Well, we helped initiate, the Mecklenburg, of course I'm not sure, way back, back in the mid early '70s, through A. Philip Randolph, the local Central Labor Council, and the Black Ministers Association, we conducted voter registration drives and get out the vote efforts, and that continued to grow. Then Jim Pierce came back here, and as part of the central Labor Council, took a more active part in just that voter phase of it and became-- He and Tawana [Wilson-Allen] were co-chairmen of the Voter Coalition and Jim was of course out of the Central Labor Council. It was and they incorporated all of the people we had in A. Philip Randolph into that, and the Central Labor Council was involved in the voter, it was an intricate part of the Voter Coalition. The firefighters were an intricate part of the Voter Coalition to start with, always have been. It was just a continuation of what we were doing in merging with—now with the League of Women Voters, the black political caucus, and it's a tough little act because you've got the League of Women Voters. You've got a lot of church groups, and they're non-partisan organizations. So you cannot involve, you cannot put fliers, leaflets, anything in those vans that you're delivering to people



or have people out working the, just knocking on doors and handing out stuff that are using their vans and their stuff. That has to be pure non-partisan. Then you've got the Democratic Party who will rent vans. You can put anything you want to, and the people you send out with them can knock on doors, go vote for whoever you want, whoever you're pushing, whichever candidates you're working.

EG: You've been an official part like of the, you mentioned you were on the state Democratic executive committee. Have you been part of the local Democratic Party organization?

BB: Well, by virtue of that seat, gives me a seat on the county board. But she's on the county, she's a vice-chairman of this precinct, which put her on the county board too. The chairman and vice-chairman of each precinct, and I have held those positions and been on the county board because of that. When I got elected, they said anybody that was as active in the union as I'd been active and as identifiable with unions couldn't get elected to the board. I finished third in an election where they were electing fifteen people.

EG: Okay, but you had all the support from all the, from the organized—

BB: We had, we at times at one time the firefighters controlled fourteen precincts, organizations in Mecklenburg County. They don't today. You can—

EG: When was that when they had that much control?

BB: I'm not—

EG: Was that in the '70s or '80s do you think? I'm just trying to get a sense of when this sort of—

BB: I could not give you-- I just remember, and I know who Marvin, it was the second time when I came back on the, as president after I had been off for two terms with Marvin and John ( ) and them were part of the board. We got—

EG: President of the firefighter's union or—

BB: Yes. Well, I was never, I was president of the Central Labor Council through the whole thing. I left the office, the last time I left office, the firefighter office the second after I'd been in the second time, I left the office of Central Labor Council at the same time or the same year.

EG: Okay. What sort of, like when you were president of the firefighter's union, all this work, you talked, what sort of impact did it have on the like the working conditions? How successful were you at

getting your goals met in terms of—you mentioned a little bit about that. But if you could talk some more about that.

BB: Since back in the '70s, since we became pretty active, city council decided that we needed to be paid on a national average instead of a regional average, which is a considerably, and at that time we were the highest paid in North Carolina. When I left office, outside of Florida we were the highest paid in the South. You had to go up, get above Delaware into Pennsylvania before you found firefighters that made more money than we made. We worked shorter hours. We were working fifty-two hours a week, and North, here when most everybody else in North Carolina was still working seventy-two hours a week. When they finally passed the Fair Labor Standards Act which made the rest of them get down to fifty-six, and most of them are still down at fifty-six today. They had to give some of them pay raises because they weren't making minimum wage. See they weren't covered under wage and hour until that time. When they got covered under wage and hour laws, they, even though the hours were fifty-six instead of forty like everybody else, but it still better than seventy-two. But we were already, we had been working fifty-two for years. I mean for a couple, at least three or four years when the law was passed. So we worked, our retirement system, I'm under one of the best retirement systems in the country.

EG: Because of the organizing and—

BB: It's because we were there to push. The council and people like that were receptive, were at least willing to listen.

EG: Very impressive. Were there any things that you wanted to have enacted that—

BB: There's a ton of stuff. There's always, if you ask, if you ask for ten percent, and the city manager says that's good. You didn't ask for enough. That's just the rules of the game. There's always—

EG: So part of your strategy was asking for more than you knew you were going to get.

BB: Well, part of your strategy is asking for what you can sell. Sometimes on occasions we went, when the city manager presented the budget, we weren't there. We had to go back to the council and get the council to make us part, to do what we wanted them to do. They did it on several occasions.

EG: So that, I mean that's very impressive considering the climate you were in with this whole anti-unionism and just going against the grain that you were able to get all these, accomplish as much as you did.



BB: But we had, I didn't do this. There's a lot of good people that were involved in all of this. Some of the people who worked, maybe worked the hardest never knew what they were doing this for.

EG: Really.

BB: Sure. I could call Wade Brewer up and tell him the Westside Community Organization--. He was inactive, but I got him because we needed that support. Got him actively involved in that Westside community organization. He did all those things in that Westside Community Organization. But because he was so active, it meant when I had a councilman or somebody having problems out there, I could go to Marvin Smith because I had, there were a couple of--. Wilson was out there. I had three or four people who were out there, and we had more than that who were involved. But we had some key people. Wade never asked me what we were doing or why. He just went out there and worked like hell in that organization. But he became such an intricate part of that organization, and they don't want, since I put him there, they don't want to make me mad. So things work.

EG: So he, because he was part of that organization and ( ) where there, did he have other interests for doing that sort of work? ( )

BB: When I called him up and said, "Look. I need somebody. We need some help out here." He went out there and got to working with those people. He liked doing what they were doing. Hell they were doing, they were working for that community out there. They were doing community projects. We helped them. We supplied information. We supplied manpower for some of the things that they needed to--. Because of the Hickory--

EG: I was just about to ask you about that.

BB: Because of the Hickory thing, when the Eastern machinists were on strike. That was the--

EG: Eastern Airlines.

BB: Yeah. When Eastern was going belly up, and they went on strike. Well, all cities in North Carolina have what they call a model picketing law. Well, see I was involved in the Hickory thing. The federal court struck the picketing law down in that suit. Now the city, if you take a group out here and are going to picket city hall or some place in Charlotte. Police are going to come out, and they're going to read you that ordinance. They know that damned ordinance is unconstitutional. They know it's been declared

unconstitutional by the court. What they also know is that you don't know that. So when the machinists were out there, they were giving those people a terrible time.

EG: The police were.

BB: Yeah. They would, they told them that they could put, the law says you can only have four people in a block. They declared that ramp out there, the loading dock where you drive up and take your baggage out. Downstairs and upstairs, they declared both of that part of the same block. They told them they could have two pickets upstairs and two pickets downstairs. They had a policeman at one end. Now, everything's happening in Charlotte, they still had time to have a policeman sitting at one end of the upper deck and another one at the other end of the lower deck. They had two police cars out there, twenty-four hours a day as long as they had those pickets up, four pickets out there. They even gave them some crap about when they changed shift, one guy walking up with a new sign that they would, that was too many. He was just replacing the guy that was there. It was-- And I had, this was after I had left office. Marvin Wilson was at that time president of the, had taken my place as president of the, he had been my vice president.

EG: Of the firefighters union.

BB: He had become president of the firefighters. I said, let's go out there and help the machinists. So we get fifteen firefighters. See those guys you might say a little bit stupid. They're going to follow me out there and they might get put in jail. But they know that they're going out there to break the city of Charlotte's law, ordinance. We take fifteen firefighters out there, plus we picked up some of their machinist people. So we've got about twenty pickets on each level. The president of that local out there was so afraid that I was going to get him put in jail that he took his toothbrush with him. I said, "They're not going to put us in jail. In fact they're probably not going to do anything." So after we and we pulled up with that van that's got the firefighter emblem on it, on the back and both sides. File all of those people out of that fifteen-passenger van. Onto those decks up there, started walking the picket lines with picket signs. Then we noticed that the police department, we were standing upstairs up on the upper deck. All of a sudden that police car that had been down there, it's came around and it's, two police cars over here on the upper deck and they're back to back. Now all of a sudden there's four police cars over there, and there's people over there with white shirts on. Next few minutes, phew, everybody's gone. There's

nobody. There's no police cars. It's a simple, all they did was, I presume they may have checked with the city attorney's office. They may have known it in their own bureaucracy down there. But they knew that once those firefighters showed up that there wasn't any question about that we knew the unconstitutionality of the law they're trying to enforce. We were the plaintiffs in the suit and but they will do it and they'll do it every time. They will do it tomorrow, and that law's been unconstitutional since probably some time in the mid '70s or '80s.

EG: When you did the—

BB: The Hickory case.

EG: The Hickory—

BB: As a result, the Hickory case-- The police chief up there told me he was going to put me in jail. We were up there Friday. They had pickets around city hall. That's what it all came about.

EG: Who had pickets around city hall?

BB: The firefighters.

EG: In Hickory?

BB: In Hickory, the Hickory firefighters. I was up there. Hobby was up there. We were on the agenda. John Duran who was president of the state firefighters, but for some reason the police chief decided to pick on me. I don't know what, sweet and lovable as I am, I can't understand that. After I left Friday he told the Hickory firefighters that if I ever showed up in the city of Hickory again, he'd have me arrested. Well, Monday night was their council meeting. That was the night that we had requested a spot on the agenda and been turned down. So we show up for the council meeting. Chambers called me, and he wasn't representing. The Hickory firefighters were being represented by Shelly Blum out of the law center in the AFL-CIO in Raleigh. But Julius called and left me his number in case the police chief did what he said he was going to do. But they would, that's somebody shooting their mouth off. Monday night when I showed up there, I looked in the, they were an amphitheater. It sits down, and the council sits down here. There's benches up here. ( ) back up here. It's open just people stand, and they can have receptions and stuff up there. He's leaning up against a wall in the center, right in the middle of the building.

EG: The person that threatened to arrest you.

BB: Yeah, the police chief. So I walk in and walk in, stand up there beside him. I got him live at eleven o'clock that night on channel nine, three every, all three stations here and one in Winston-Salem and the one in Asheville. There's no way that he could say that I didn't know he was there. He never said a word to me. Of course he never intended to arrest me anyway.

EG: So you took them to court for, because they denied the rights to be heard at the city council meeting.

BB: Yes.

EG: And you said that the outcome was in your favor, right.

BB: Well,--

EG: Of the court case.

BB: The district court judge up there ruled in their favor. Accused us of terrorizing the city and a whole bunch of crap but the Fourth Circuit overturned that and the Supreme Court upheld the Fourth Circuit. The Fourth Circuit is the one that overturned the picketing ordinance. Four people per block, they said you could put, you could not block an entrance or an exit. You've got to allow people access to get into the building and out of the building. But how many pickets is irrelevant and immaterial. It's an abridgement of your right to assemble and right to petition for grievances. As long as you don't prohibit people from going in and out of the building, you can have as many pickets as you can cram in the block.

EG: I wanted to ask you too about, I have two more questions. One was have you always been a member of the ACLU or was this something that—

BB: I'm not a member of the ACLU. I have just sort of drifted away from that and am not currently a member of the ACLU. Up until that time I became a member of the ACLU back in, when we were taking the city to court, and I became familiar with some of the lawyers in the ACLU, and I don't remember exactly how long. I was a member of it a pretty good while before I became the chairman. And I served one term as chairman.

EG: So was that something that joining that was obviously well, influenced by doing this lawsuit and meeting—

BB: Yeah, they filed a brief. The ACLU, the national ACLU filed a brief on our behalf so it one of those things you just—

EG: You said too that when you did this Voter Coalition, voter work that one of your allies too were women's organizations. I was wondering what, you mentioned League of Women Voters and—

BB: See they're part of the coalition now. They weren't when we started, but they have become and I, like I said I don't know when that--. A lot of groups are part of that now. The Sierra Club is part of it.

EG: Part of what coalition?

BB: The Voter Coalition.

EG: That Mecklenburg Voter Coalition. Okay. And during all this time with the things happening nationally like you mentioned King's death and civil rights demonstrations and so forth, were you influenced at all by that, by King or in kind of your with like the integration of the fire department that happened and so forth?

BB: Well, like I said, I needed a lawyer. As I was involved in this, you develop a different strand of friends. So you develop and some of the black members of the city council became, and some of the blacks in the state legislature became good friends of mine. Jim Richardson was a good friend of mine. Harvey Gantt and Ron Leeper, Mel Watt, have always been moral support, have supported us pretty well. When they, what's this organization that Don Reid's the head of, Concerned Citizens or something like that. They called me, wanted to get rid of all the blacks and women. They called me and wanted me to join that organization, and they wanted to get rid of all the blacks and women that were, women that were in elected office in Mecklenburg County. I said, hey, that's all the votes I've got. I mean, what makes you people crazy. I don't want to be with you old white males. That's not exactly what I called them but—

EG: Well, I'm I have to leave some time to go over these words. Was there anything else that you wanted to add at all or anything. I know there's a lot more we could talk about. But anything you wanted to add?

BB: Except I've had a lot of help. Then like I said, I've had help of people who didn't even realize they were helping.

EG: That they had their trust in you or trust—

BB: No, they got—

EG: (        )

BB: They got put in some places where they could do something and they did it. There are people who will tell you they will help, and they come in and are more trouble than they're worth. The first thing they do is you're not doing it right. We want to change all this. We need to change this. Why are we doing it this way? Why can't we do it another way? Then you have people like Charlie Adams and Mendel Knight and people who come in and say, what do you want done? Let's do it. Even better than that, you can pick up the phone and call them and tell them this is what I need done. Handle it. They'll—

EG: Having just the network of people and—

BB: I've had a lot of good people like that.

EG: Yeah.

BB: The pension that we're under now like I said is one of the best in the United States. Marvin was my vice president. Marvin did most of the work on that thing. I get more credit for that than I ever deserved because basically I appointed the committee and made him chairman of the committee. The only thing I did was hire Bill Veder. I didn't hire Bill Veder either. That's not true either. One of the members of our committee, we hired, to get this we had the pension in the city always had an actuary done on it. They always, well, we can't make any changes in this thing. Let's hire us an actuary and have us an actuary done by us, which is public record so they, you can't stop that. We're fifty percent contributors to that thing. So we had every right to have our auditor, an actuary done on it. Hired the company to do it, and they called one of the members of the committee that was working for us that was doing it. Said we got a problem. Bill Veder who used to be the city manager who I had some classic battles with. The guy called me and says, "Bill Veder works for them." He said, "If we do this, he'll be involved with us." I said, "Hire them. Bill Veder's a professional. He worked for them. We're paying him. He'll work for us." And he's damned good at what he does. If you've got him for an opponent you've got a worthy opponent. I'd rather have him on my payroll than on theirs.

EG: When did you, you start to see the impact of your efforts being felt? I mean obviously you had the victory with the court decisions and I mean, in the '70s did you already know?

BB: Never. If you go and talk to most Charlotte firemen, now I dealt with the numbers. I knew what we made. I knew what the budget was, what, where we had to come in, what was reasonable that we could without, and so but most firemen don't know that. Most firemen think that all of these things came



from heaven because they were so wonderful. You've got people there today that are not members of the union. They don't do anything for me. A whole lot of this is a situation because you can't go out and brag about doing these things. You can't come back out and say, but the pay raises we got you. The best way you can get something to happen, the simplest and easiest way to get something to happen is to get a few people who start something, and you sell them that it's their idea and then you back away from them and let them do it. I mean—if you're dealing with the state legislature or something like that, you convince them this is a problem and you hope that you've got enough inroads already that they understand what the solution has to be. Then they jump on it and start working on it. Well, you have people who wouldn't vote for—. You'll have legislators down there who wouldn't vote for something. If they knew I had anything to do with it, it's an automatic no vote. So you just walk away and let things happen.

EG: So now you think there isn't as much support for the unions, firefighters.

BB: I don't know. I'm not there. I don't ever try to meddle. Everybody has a different style. I got accused that I played one side of the aisle all the time. Even my daughter tells me that you couldn't function today. I played Democratic Party politics. I played it inside the Democrat Party. I used, that's where my influence was. If I got a Republican vote on something, that was fine, but I didn't expect it.

EG: Did you start seeing like changes in terms of better wages on ( )?

BB: Almost immediately after we got the union. Once we got the union the pay started going up.

EG: When, after the court—

BB: But then it had gone up. It was sort of hanging there and the city council says, well, we're going to pay you on a national average. Now we didn't make the national average. But we were only a percent or two under the national average. We were, we never went over the national average. But still it was a whole lot more money than everybody else around here was making.

EG: Yeah. So right after you got the recognition from, after the court decision.

BB: Yes.

EG: Good.

BB: Well, there was some, that the national thing came much later. It was probably in the '70s. That was after we got district representation. They are the ones who raised it to a national average. The salaries had started to come up anyway. In fact one of the ( ) was why did this come out of

Charlotte. We were already the highest paid in the state. But the problem was, ( ) in the state making nothing. When they passed the national, when they passed, covered us under the national labor laws in '76 was when that was done. It was done under Carter administration, but it wasn't done in seventy--. Well, see it was done, courts ruled it unconstitutional. They couldn't do that, and then the court changed its mind. I forgot exactly the process. But there was a period. But when it was done, when they did it, really it basically did not affect us at all. We were already under, we—they set the hours at fifty-six. We were at fifty-two already.

EG: When the national, there was action on the national level.

BB: Yeah, we weren't anywhere close, we didn't have anybody close to minimum wage. A lot of cities in this state had to raise their wages to get to the minimum wage with the hour cut, even with cutting the hours.

EG: Did you also do this political work on the federal level like in terms of working with congressmen?

BB: Oh yeah we've worked with, we worked in congressional campaigns.

EG: And presidential campaigns.

BB: Senator, and presidential. I was on the Dukakis steering committee for North Carolina.

EG: You worked too on Harvey Gantt's campaign for mayor?

BB: I worked on Harvey Gantt's campaign for city council, and Harvey Gantt's campaign for mayor, Harvey Gantt's campaign for the senate twice.

EG: Yeah, wow. Well, turn this off a second. [break in taping] Was there I'll ask you again, was there anything else you wanted to add or whatever? Okay. This has been very helpful and very interesting to learn particularly for me about the political organizing and coalition building and so forth.

BB: You have to do that. I mean you have to be—too many of, and that's been our main downfall is the unions and too many of them have been too narrowly--. The president of a local wants to be the big fish in that little pond. But he does not want to expand out and the Central Labor Council. A lot of your big locals, the presidents of those locals never attend the Central Labor Council meetings. They send delegates, and what you hope for is you get good delegates and people that could do, do the good things.



EG: So you mean like the president, the downfall is they don't focus on expanding their network?

BB: They're looking—

EG: They're looking more for their own glory and power or—

BB: They're looking in house. The people at General Tire, and General Tire had some wonderful people out there. Charlie Adams is out of that local out there. There's Dan Bailey, there were, but president of that local rarely ever met him. I had met him but rarely ever saw him. Only thing he was concerned about was what was in-house, dealing with Continental Tire. But not realizing that the world out here was changing, and he better be, he needed to be influencing that change in the world or it was going to—it just put him out of business.

EG: So they've been too focused on the internal matters and not reached out to the larger labor community to do ( ) for organizing.

BB: Well, they just don't, they have to be involved in the politics because the politics is going to be involved with them. Politics is what affects them and they've got to—you've got to be able to address that.

EG: Right. Right. Yeah. Well, let's see. You mentioned Parks Sims.

BB: Parks Helms.

EG: So is it P-A-R-K and then how—

BB: Helms.

EG: Adams.

BB: Helms.

EG: Helms, okay.

BB: He's chairman of the board of county commissioners.

EG: H-E-L-M-S like Jesse Helms.

BB: Yes.

EG: Any relation to him?

BB: They're both from Union County. Parks' family is from Union County. So I'm sure there is some relationship. Now he won't admit to that.

EG: Jim Black, that's just like how it sounds.

BB: Yep. Jim Richardson was the state senator was—

EG: You said, you were a module commander. How do you spell the—

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE B

START OF TAPE 2, SIDE A

EG: We'll see if we can—

BB: [Referring to his wife.] My speller just walked out of here.

EG: Okay. The Firemen's Assembly, that was a proper title.

BB: Yes. It was formed before we, that's the group that took the city to court and state to court to get the union back.

EG: And do you know if there was like an apostrophe with the S at all?

BB: No, I don't.

EG: Hazel Irvin.

BB: First black firefighter ever hired in Charlotte.

EG: Yeah, do you remember if that was I-R-V-I-N and then—

BB: Um hmm. I ought to know that because I used to make out his payroll.

EG: Okay. Bob Biddleton.

BB: Middleton.

EG: Middleton, okay, so that would be like it sounds.

BB: Yeah.

EG: Henry Underhill.

BB: Was the city attorney.

EG: Like it sounds. It would probably be. Wilbur Hobby.

BB: Was president of the state AFL-CIO.

EG: Do you remember the H-O-B-B-Y.

BB: Yes.

EG: And then Wilbur like, W-I-L-B-U-R.

BB: Out of American Tobacco plant in Durham.

EG: Oh how about that. Some of these, it's just interesting when, with doing these oral histories some of these names come up, like Jim Lawrence and Jim Andrews and-- Black Ministers Association, is that a proper word?

BB: I have no idea whether that—

EG: Was that?

BB: I don't even, I wouldn't even, I wouldn't know what the official title was because I did not have to-- I did not have that kind of paperwork coming across my desk. I just—

EG: So there was the Black Ministers Association?

BB: Yeah, there was a Black Ministers, and Jim Lawrence was involved with them and—

EG: And Tracy Auston, the women firefighter. Did you see more female firefighters get elected or come up, female employees in the fire department come forward as you were—?

BB: Oh yeah. We had a bunch of them. She wasn't even the first one, and she was, I don't know how many there are, but we have chiefs, at least one that's a chief now.

EG: Was that something your union helped do, was get more women or it just kind of—

BB: We didn't do anything to stop it. We didn't do anything that would, it was going to happen. So let it happen.

EG: Right. So—

BB: Now some locals and that's true in some cases, but they spent tons of money in court fighting black affirmative action and female affirmative action programs. As far as I know the firefighters were never under either one. We were never under a court order because mainly not because we were that right, but because Chambers had been our lawyer for so long.

EG: Do you remember with Tracy Auston was, if it was A-U-S-T-E-N.

BB: T-O-N.

EG: O-N. Okay. And Tracy is T-R-A-C-Y.

BB: Yes.

EG: Bill Poe, is that P-O-E.

BB: I don't remember. That thing's in history.

EG: Marvin Smith, is that like how it sounds?

BB: Yes. He's an ex-Lance Packing, truck driver for Lance Packing Company. He's been head of that Westside—he's ninety years old now.

EG: Would he be a good person to talk to?

BB: He probably certainly would be.

EG: He was you said with the Westside Community Organization.

BB: He's the godfather of the Westside Community Organization.

EG: Is he white or black?

BB: White.

EG: You think he was involved with sort of voter registration—

BB: I don't know that he's ever done that.

EG: Okay.

BB: He was head of that Westside Community Organization. They took up issues with the West Side. The West Side of Charlotte is predominantly the poorer side of Charlotte. It's lower probably lower middle income, white. It's upper income black in some places.

EG: Interesting, was he involved in the '70s and '80s with this?

BB: Oh he was involved from the time that—

EG: Forever.

BB: The '70s is when most of those neighborhood organizations started to flourish. They put, see each one, each little neighborhood has their own organization. But the Westside coalition was a coalition of all of those little neighborhood organizations on the West Side.

EG: Okay. That's right like these neighborhoods and these associations and movements. Is he in the phonebook do you know?

BB: I think I have his phone number here somewhere.

EG: Great.

BB: I'm sure I used to have it. [walking away/break in taping] 04-399-3198.

EG: It's okay to use you as a referral.

BB: Yes.

EG: Great—someone. Good. So it was Westside Community Organization.

BB: Yes.

EG: Okay and Mickey Moshow.

BB: Michaux.

EG: Michaux.

BB: He's a state representative from Durham.

EG: Okay.

BB: He's still in the state legislature.

EG: Do you remember how his name is spelled?

BB: No, I do not. I wouldn't even attempt that.

EG: That would be easy to find out I think. Jim, oh, I know how that's spelled. You mentioned

Mendel—

BB: Knight.

EG: Mendel Knight, is it K-N-I-G-H-T?

BB: Yes.

EG: Then the first name.

BB: I don't have any idea.

EG: Let's see.

BB: I used to have it on that card too, but it's not. He's died, dead now.

EG: You mentioned a Driftwood Restaurant. Is it, it's no longer around you said.

BB: It's collapsed.

EG: It was Driftwood. Was it Driftwood one word, do you know? Okay. That's all right.

BB: It's rotted down now. It's been out of business so long it's—

EG: Yeah. You mentioned Bert Bennett.

BB: Yes. He's still around.

EG: B-U-R-T or B-E-R-T? [transcriptionist note: It's BERT]

BB: I don't know that either.

EG: Would he be a good person to talk to? Was he? Who was he again?

BB: The godfather of the Haw River Gang.

EG: Oh, okay.

BB: He was out of Winston-Salem.

EG: Okay, so that's not quite in our focus area.

BB: Somebody has probably already written, Bert's probably already been taken care of.

EG: Okay. Bob Scott like it sounds.

BB: That's the governor.

EG: Okay.

BB: Kerr Scott was his father who was also governor.

EG: Okay, so that's—and you said it was the, you called it the River Gang.

BB: Haw River Gang.

EG: Haul River Gang?

BB: Haw River, H-A-W.

EG: Okay. You mentioned—

BB: Jim Hunt is a product. Terry Sanford is a product of the Haw River.

EG: You mentioned Vin Root. Jim Root. [transcriptionist note: former Charlotte Mayor Richard

Vinroot.] Well, Ruth Easterling.

BB: She's a state legislator.

EG: Is that E-A-S-T-E-R-L-I-N-G?

BB: [laughing]

EG: That's okay. As long as we have a phonetically, okay.

BB: She's ninety-two years old and sharp as a tack.

EG: Yeah. She, you said she was with the state legislator [sic].

BB: She was a state legislator, yes.

EG: She was someone you—

BB: Someone we depended on.

EG: Depended on. So you think she'd be a good person to talk to.

BB: Ruth would always be a good person to talk to.

EG: Yeah, okay. Is she in the phonebook?

BB: Now I do not have her phone number now.

EG: So probably.

BB: I would imagine she's in the phone book. She always was. Because I always had, when she was in the legislature, I always had her number so I didn't--

EG: Right. So she was involved in the '70s and '80s like as a representative.

BB: She is, if they're doing an oral history, they've probably already done her because she's served, she was still in the legislature when she was ninety years old.

EG: Isn't that something. Okay, so a very longstanding person in the—

BB: In there. I'm not sure which one served the longest, her or Bea Holt.

EG: Who is Bea, oh Bea Holt?

BB: She was a member of the legislature from Alamance County, which is the home of the Haw River Gang.

EG: Okay. Harry Grimmer.

BB: That's irrelevant. You can scratch that. He was a state senator.

EG: A state senator. I don't remember what you said about him.

BB: When the civil service, he was the one that was wanting to put it on the agenda.

EG: He wouldn't or he—

BB: He was wanting to put it on the agenda so they could ( ) do away with our civil service.

EG: So—

BB: But that was irrelevant. He never got a second. So—

EG: Oh okay.

BB: You can scratch his name off because he didn't have any play in the thing anyway.

EG: He was just the one who was a supporter, but then no one seconded it.

BB: He couldn't get a second to get it on the agenda.

EG: Okay.

BB: They never discussed it. It died in Ruth's briefcase.

EG: Let's see here. John Duran.

BB: He was president of the North Carolina State Professional Firefighters.

EG: Do you remember the spelling of that, with his last name?

BB: No.

EG: Shelly Blum.

BB: He was the attorney for the—

EG: The law firm of AFL-CIO you said. Do you remember the spelling of that one?

BB: Um hmm, B-L-U-M is—

EG: Do you remember if the Shelly was with the E-Y or just a Y?

BB: He's a lawyer here in Charlotte now.

EG: Would he be a good person to talk to?

BB: No, I don't really think so.

EG: Okay. Ron Lieber.

BB: Ron Leeper was a member of the city council. Harvey Gantt was a member of the city council. [walking away—letting cat in]

EG: Lieber, do you remember was that L-I-E-B-E-R?

BB: Leeper.

EG: Oh Leeper.

BB: Ron Leeper, yeah.

EG: I think someone else mentioned his name. Oh and you said Don Reid.

BB: Don Reid is a member of that old what is it Concerned Citizens. They're against everything.

EG: Was that R-E-E-D?

BB: Yes. [transcriptionist note: It's R-E-I-D]

EG: Oh I think that's, that's it. That wasn't too painful. Thank you again.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by L. Altizer, June 21, 2006