

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

NOTES AND LOG - MELTON JOHNSON

Interviewee: Melton Johnson

Interviewer: Amanda Covington

Date: 27 April 1999

Location: Mooresville, N.C.

Tape No.: (cassette 1 of 1)  
(approximately 90 minutes)

Notes: I met Mr. Johnson at the furniture store where he works in downtown Mooresville.

We were able to use a desk in a quiet section of the showroom for the interview, with the tape recorder on a desk between myself and Mr. Johnson. I learned that Mr. Johnson had been a student during the time of public school desegregation and was a football player for Mr. Al Jones, who was also interviewed for this project. Mr. Jones noted that Mr. Johnson had been one of his first black football players, and he really "paved the way" for other black students to become involved with organized school sports after desegregation. Mr. Johnson is a native of Mooresville, and I greatly appreciated his insight into the area and his opinions about going to the formerly all-white schools.

The interview went very smoothly, but I felt like the interview only scratched the surface of Mr. Johnson's knowledge of public school desegregation. The interview was relatively lengthy, yet there were many more subjects that might have been explored. One of the things that impressed me most about this interview were Mr. Johnson's attitudes about life and the way that his schooling has shaped his opinions and attitudes. I also appreciated his emphasis on the closeness of the Mooresville community.

## LOG

### [Cassette 1 of 1, Side A]

Beginning question about being a native of Mooresville. He was born in Mooresville, in the hospital known as Lowrance, which is now Lake Norman Regional Medical Center. Question about his family and siblings. Remarks that he was the oldest of ten children, his mother was very young, so he lived with and was raised by his grandparents. Notes the emphasis they placed on respect, and he states that his grandparents didn't know a lot about "education" but they did know about "family morals" of "love and respect". These things are still important to him today. Discusses the importance of love as a foundation for one's life. Mr. Johnson mentions how today individuals base their lives on getting an education, a job, and making a lot of money, and he stresses that they still must have a foundation of love. The respect that he has in his life extends to all races. Mentions his job as a home-school liaison at South Elementary School; working with parents and students, he helped prevent children from leaving school by teaching them this respect and love. Feels that he was brought up to respect older people - this was part of the foundation set by his grandparents.

Talks about race relations specifically: "sure it was some bad whites and also there were some bad blacks". Mentions looking beyond history and the past to learn to "respect people for who they are instead of what they are". Believes that if people treat you poorly, you should treat them better. He gives thanks for his grandparents and his wife, whom he considers a blessing. Talks about understanding why children have difficulties today because they don't have the guidance they should. Notes the importance of telling his children that, even with great success in life, they should not "forget about one another". Talks about his daughter who will graduate from a master's degree program at Wake Forest University this year; he feels strongly that his daughter has "not forgotten where she came from". Mentions how others have worked to make them feel comfortable when they visit Wake Forest.

Talking about school specifically, Mr. Johnson talks about how Mr. Jones at the Junior High School "went out of his way to make the black students feel at home". Talks about a black coach from Dunbar who taught civics at the Junior High. Tells of how Mr. Jones went to see this coach in the hopes of encouraging some of the black students, several having played midget league football, to play ball at the Junior High. Mr. Johnson talks

about how the white schools could offer sports to the students that were not available before integration. Dunbar didn't have sports due to a "shoot-out" that had occurred with Catawba in a previous year. The instigators of the incident had not been involved in sports but were from out-of-town and had only come "to stir up some trouble". At the time, Dunbar only had baseball and basketball.

Talks about his bonds with other football team members from the class of 1972 - he feels that many of those young men worked to make the black students feel comfortable. Mr. Jones also worked to help the black students to feel comfortable. Talks about negative stereotypes of African-Americans:

"I have walked down the parking lot and white ladies have got in their car and you hear doors: 'click, click, click, click,' but it don't bother me. One time it probably, it did, but no - [talking to children at school] . . . I told them I could walk down the streets of Montgomery, Alabama and I would think that . . . and someone could call me a 'nigger' - I'm going to keep on walking because, number one, my mother didn't name me 'nigger', so why should I get mad about something that I'm not?"

Talks about leaving racial hatred in this century and not carrying it into the next century. He says he has learned to ignore many things. He tries to teach young black children this same attitude, emphasizing that students need to try their best. Feels that he "learned more in the last four years of my high school than I did in the whole eight years at Dunbar" and he feels this is true for his life, although he admits that he cannot speak for other people. Mentions the fact that Dunbar got old books instead of new. Talks about wondering if he should have chosen to try the middle school earlier [this would have been possible through freedom of choice]. Admits that he doesn't dwell on this today.

He places some blame for children's problems today on parents who blame teachers for the problems - mentions one parent who felt that her black child was ignored at predominantly white school - feels that parents should listen to teachers and children. Feels he and his wife were supportive of the education of their children. They both attended school together in Mooresville - admits that he was shy but his wife cared for him a lot at that time.

Notes the importance of religion in this country - always

instilled the importance of prayer in his children, even if others may not even know they're praying. Feels that parents should teach children morals today - talks about the philosophy of Dr. Spock - believes that spanking, not done abusively, is necessary for raising children. Also doesn't believe in hitting one's spouse. He personally doesn't believe in inter-racial marriage, but would not have a problem with his children marrying a white. Talks about how his wife has always stood by him. Notes the importance of communication in marriage. Feels that people today are not honest in marriages, and this sometimes leads to more anger.

Talks about children today having difficulties at home that lead to problems in school. Mentions Ms. Craig, his English teacher in school, and he mentions still seeing her today and talking for hours - she helped him a great deal during school. Feels that some people today "forget where they came from" and will not help children who are truly at risk. Feels that patience with students is important today. Makes a basketball analogy - importance of doing what the "coach" says, even if the player does score the basket and does not follow the coach's instructions. Also, speaks about the school shootings in Colorado, and how the shooters have not been mentioned much, and notes how their parents are also suffering, and it is love that is still important, even in this situation. Talks about those who have lost children and siblings and admits that "it does take a toll". Wants to pass down a "foundation" to his children that his grandparents, mother, and others created for him.

Talks about seeing preference in the classroom between students who are upper class and lower class - "then you want to know why the child shows resentment and things". Tries to talk to and encourage other children, especially if they feel they have been mistreated. Encourages children to counter this mistreatment with kindness. Mentions going into people's houses today to deliver furniture and receiving a negative look from them; he doesn't let him bother him and treats them well. Importance of being positive about the day and being in God's creation. Admits that some people don't believe in hell today and other worries for today.

"But, as Dr. Martin Luther King said, some of the things that he has spoken - and it's coming true - nobody would have thought that black and whites would have went to school together, nobody . . . and it's a lot of people now who are fighting it now . . . it's still going on".

Talks about the fact that children will fight for short periods of time but adults will carry grudges for long periods of time. Talks about the film of the Delaney sisters ["Having Our Say"], who understand how important family "values and morals" are. Teachers need support from parents. Talks about experiences with his own children - says that he knows children will lie sometimes and parents should try to understand the full story when a child is distressed at school. Feels that simple spankings will work in some situations. Notes how teachers couldn't spank children after integration, and how parents won't spank at home. Feels sympathy for teachers today because of their difficulties and the fear of violence. Hates that metal detectors and police officers are necessary today - feels that spanking should be used at home since its no longer in schools.

Talks about his own children and their college careers, including his youngest who is still in high school. Says that his older children feel that the younger children are easier off, but Mr. Johnson says they need to remember that times are different today. Observes other parents who seem a lot easier on their children. Feels surprised that he was recommended for an interview - he keeps a positive attitude as much as possible, and doesn't want to bring his problems to others.

Mentions that children will hold in their emotions in a lot today. Talks about MTV - parents should monitor their children's music to understand what it says. Mentions violence, sex, and hatred in hip-hop music today. Feels his generation was able to "separate the good from the bad". Talks about his own generation's music - didn't listen to it too much - talks about his love of sports, being an umpire and being around children. Does his best to talk to his players and other children.

Mentions how God has helped him and given him so much. Frustrated by shootings today. Feels that churches and parents are not doing enough today - ministers should work with youth. Feels that too many people are worried about talking about God today. Comments that desegregation was a wonderful thing - it provided his children with great opportunities. Talks about his daughter's work with counseling children-the importance of "starting at the bottom". Still feels comfortable talking with his daughter about situations he deals with in his interactions with children. One example of when a parent needed to simply say "no" to a child, and the child really wanted to spend time with the parent. Feels that the early years are most important, and that communication is lacking between parents and children today. Too many people are pre-occupied with their careers

today, he worries, and forget the importance of taking care of children. Has brought up his four children, and they know family morals and values. Children must listen to adults, parents, and teachers. Story about policeman not waving, but situations like that are okay, since that the policeman's prerogative. Mentions how he loves Senator [Jesse] Helms because "he's what he is" and is not a hypocrite. Helms firmly opposes and supports ideas, and won't let others sway him, in particular about the Martin Luther King holiday. Mr. Johnson feels that some people didn't really care about the day - they simply wanted a day off from work.

End Tape 1, Side A  
Begin Tape 1, Side B

Comments on the Confederate flag. He's not insulted by the flag because he is not enslaved - he feels free because of "grace of God". Others are "in bondage" because they are not happy. Admits that he is broke, but happy and free; mentions his loving wife, who is better than female stars of today. Feels that glamour and money are simply "not going to change me".

Question about what Dunbar was like. Says that he was a "slow child" and didn't find very much interesting at school. Couldn't write or spell his name in first grade; depended on copying from his name being sketched by a cousin. Feels that there were good teachers at Dunbar, but he didn't receive a great deal of help. Mr. Johnson felt that he "missed out" on parts of school. Had difficulty in reading and therefore following instruction - he wouldn't ask questions. When he went to the Junior High he was somewhat "forced" to improve his grades in order to stay on the football team - this gave him a goal. Question about discipline at Dunbar and at the Junior High. Felt that today teachers would have called home about discipline, but he needed to improve his school work. At the high school he didn't have discipline problems. Talks about how his grandparents didn't go to PTA meetings, although Dunbar did have a PTA, based on my question. Feels that his grandparents did the best they could, but they did teach him family morals.

Mentions how he hated being called on in class because he often didn't know the answer. Says that he understands the way children might feel about this today, especially when other kids make fun. He never got angry enough to get violent - he feared going home suspended to his grandparents. His grandparents were very firm on discipline.

Question about the first year he attended the white schools - it was the ninth grade, 1969-70. Question about feelings on the first day at the integrated school. He mentioned that a bunch of fights did occur that day, but he didn't get involved because he avoids trouble in general. He avoided peer pressure of the time. The fights were between black and white students, and included yelling racial slurs. Mentions Mr. Small, the principal and other teachers who helped out the first day. Teachers would pull to the side and have a discussion with the fighting children.

Admits that he didn't want to go to the white school on the first day, but football playing helped in meeting others and he felt better after the first week. He looked forward to going to school and football practice. Didn't get to play midget league football because he lived in the country and his grandparents couldn't drive him every day. He lettered in three sports at the high school. Talks about coaches at the school, some of whom he is still in contact with today. Feels that black students today don't realize how much the teachers truly care about their students. One staff member of the school today especially worked to help the black students - she would only send children home in the worst situation. One incident involved the graduation from 5th to 6th grade - three children were going to miss the graduation if they were suspended. This woman called Mr. Johnson, who was working at Duke Power, to come to the school. She wanted him to supervise in-school suspension so that these students would not get sent home. Mr. Johnson gladly helped her out. He supervised their homework, and would always make sure that they had more work to do. They would go to lunch and return to the room immediately, in order to avoid their interaction with other students - "it wasn't no party" .

He feels that some children who are sent home today because they think it's more of a "vacation". Talks about one incident with his youngest daughter, who got suspended for a fight- Mr. Johnson's wife supervised their daughter all day, every day, having her do homework and other classwork. Mentions how his daughter was selected to be drum major at the high school but didn't get it last year, which hurt her. He encouraged her to try again, and didn't want her to quit simply because she didn't get drum major. Many of the black students dropped band during that year, but his daughter didn't. Talked about the activities and academics of each of his children. Also the careers of his children who are out of school. Felt that he had a great deal of support when raising his children, especially from older people. Feels that teachers should tell

parents about situations at school but children should respect their teachers and parents.

Question about playing sports at junior high and any racial incidences that occurred. He talks about Mooresville having a relatively large number of black students compared to other schools' sports teams, and sometimes heard racial slurs from opponents. He had to maintain his concentration - felt that opponents purposely tried to "push" him, but he didn't let it bother him. Discusses the other members of the football team from his class in those days- where they are now. Talked about making all-conference in football and track when he was a senior. Also set record in throwing discus at school. Talked about track meet in Concord in the discus. On his last throw, Mr. Johnson beat a certain opponent who came back to finally beat him he was glad to be second in conference, though, and he got to attend the state finals. Liked being able to compete with the best in conference and state.

Talked about academics at Dunbar - felt that the girls were frequently smarter than the boys. When he went to the white junior high, he was surprised to find that the white boys were equal with the white girls in academics. He is glad that his children went to predominantly-white schools, "because they got the best". Talks about his daughter being accepted at Wake Forest and obtaining a wonderful loan and looks forward to seeing her graduate. Thinks of going to Wake Forest in his station wagon, next to all of the expensive cars; but his daughter never felt awkward because of her strong family.

Mentions that he would always sign his "freedom of choice" school assignment form to Dunbar before his grandparents even saw the form, and wonders if his grandparents would have sent him to the white school otherwise. Question about having black friends who attended the white schools under freedom of choice - he had one neighbor who went to the white junior high in 7th grade. Talks about one white girl who attended Dunbar under freedom of choice, and she came in 8th grade. He wonders what differences would have occurred if he had attended the white schools earlier. Doesn't harbor any racial hatred - had white and black friends. Talks about one friend who committed suicide in past six years. Mr. Johnson felt that he had lost a brother, even though he was white. Speaks about his oldest daughter, who was the only black in the Beta club at the time she was in school; she mostly had a circle of white friends. She sometimes was picked on by black children for this, but she managed to rise above the teasing.

[Gentleman enters to retrieve object from desk where the tape recorder is sitting]

Talks about enjoying being raised in Mooresville, and the small town atmosphere. Feels that people can overcome prejudice. Glad that he attended school at the Mooresville Junior High.

End of Interview