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Interview
with
Solomon Crenshaw
June 16, 2005
by Willoughby Anderson

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

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Transcript – Solomon Crenshaw

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Interviewee: SOLOMON CRENSHAW

Interviewer: Willoughby Anderson

Interview Date: June 16, 2005

Location: Birmingham, Al

Length: 1 cassette; approximately

START OF TAPE 1, SIDE A

WA: Today is Thursday, June the 16th, 2005. The interviewer's name is Willoughby Anderson. I'm here at the *Birmingham News* downtown office interviewing Solomon Crenshaw for the Long Civil Rights Movement project on school desegregation in Birmingham for the oral history program at UNC. And if you'll please say your name, we'll see how you're picking up.

SC: Solomon Crenshaw Jr.

WA: So let's get started.

SC: Okay.

WA: Tell me, let's start learning a little bit about your childhood and growing up. So tell me where were you born, where did you grow up and go to elementary school?

SC: Born in Birmingham at [pause]. It was a hospital on the south side of Birmingham which is not there anymore. I can't think of the name; I apologize for that. But the—I am the second of six kids in my house hold. My father was a Baptist minister, the Reverend Solomon Crenshaw. My mom is currently a Head Start teacher, has done

that for a number of years along with playing piano at our church. And, let's see. I grew up in an area called Woodland Park on Birmingham's west side—well not that far west. Woodland Park is a neighborhood in Titusville where a number of black professionals tended to migrate. Particularly individuals who were Baptist ministers, school teachers, a number of doctors found their way to live there, and that is the area where I grew up.

WA: And did you go to elementary school there?

SC: I did, a place called West Center Street. An interesting place. I always called it the Unknown Matchbox, because it was a very small school and very few people recognized where it was or that it existed. I would tell people I went to West Center Street, and they said 'Oh yeah, Center Street?' I said, 'No, West Center Street! We're the ones without the gymnasium and without much of anything else.' But it was a very good school. It had a faculty that had—that was pretty strong in terms of getting students ready for the next level of their education.

WA: And so, then you went to West End—you started West End High School in 1972. What grade did you enter and how old were you?

SC: Let's see. I would have been fourteen, I guess, at the time that I entered, and of course eighteen at the time that I completed my time there.

WA: And you came in as a freshman?

SC: I came in as a freshman, yes.

WA: And how did you come to enroll in West End?

SC: Well, West End was the school where kids in my neighborhood were zoned to go. Zoning had become the practice at that time. Now I will admit that, prior to going to West End, I had scarcely given any thought to high school. Obviously there was a

next level of education beyond eighth grade, where I was, but I had—well, I won't say I had not given any thought to it. I recall there being a particular evening, I think it was a Sunday evening, where my parents put at least a couple of us in the car—I don't think it was all of us, this would have been in the fall of 1970, I guess it would have been—and we actually drove down to West End High School and just kind of looked at the outside of the building. At the time, I didn't realize the significance of that, because again, I'm just in elementary school, and I'm not quite grasping all of the ins and outs that were going on. Now my older sister, two years my senior, was going, would be going to West End in the fall of 1970, and of course hers would have been one of those first classes that would have encountered the integration of West End High School.

WA: And so, when you say you didn't realize the significance, you mean in terms of being, she was one of the first classes to desegregate, and you would be in the second class, or the third class.

SC: Well, third class actually.

WA: And so your parents took you down there to sort of check it out?

SC: Right. I think it was more so for my sister. I just came along for the ride. And maybe somewhat oblivious to exactly what was going on: 'Okay, okay, this is the high school where she's going to be going.' It's a school. It's got brick, it's got mortar. OK, big deal. I didn't realize what was beneath all that.

WA: Had you heard about desegregation in Birmingham schools but you—

SC: West Center Street was a black school: it had black students, it had black faculty. There were two exceptions to that in my memory. There was one white teacher, I don't remember if it was seventh or eighth grade when she was there—math teacher she

was. And there was one white student who was in my class—a girl; I don't remember her name. But outside of that, the world had been pretty much not black and white, but just black in terms of education for me.

And again, our neighborhood was interesting in that, as I said, it was a black neighborhood. Right next to our house is a park. A park that is pretty much nameless outside of the fact that it is in the vicinity of Spring Haven Circle, and thus kind of takes on that name. There's a set of train tracks on the far side of the park, and beyond the train tracks is an area where whites live. And it was the very realization of the idea of being on the right, or perhaps wrong, side of the tracks. Now who was on the right side of the tracks and the wrong side of the tracks? I'm sure we would each debate that. But I'd say that was the reality, and I remember there being some instances where there would be [pause] I'll call them 'cocoa bugs,' these things that would come off from pine trees and the like, and there might be some instances where a group on one side of the tracks might hurl those at people on the other side of the tracks.

WA: Oh really?

SC: Yeah, that might have happened. But, to go back to the initial point, I really don't think I was that conscious of race. In fact, I was that weird child in my household who, if asked, 'Well who called?' 'Well some man.' 'Was he a white man or a black man?' The term may have been negro at that point. 'I don't know! It was a man.' I just didn't hear that. Of course, having said that, I was that weird person in the household who tended to speak more strangely than everyone else. I think it was the result of my having grown up with a speech impediment: I stuttered. Consequently I learned to slow my speaking down so that my tongue could catch up with my brain. That combined with

my father being a Baptist minister, I developed kind of an interest in the spoken word. That combined with having an English teacher in the sixth grade who made the almost satirical statement that, 'Don't worry about using proper grammar all the time, because nobody does,' I decided 'Okay, I'm going to try to do it!' And there were instances where my brothers and sisters kind of wondered, 'Okay, where'd you get him? Obviously he's an import! [Laughter] He's not one of us.'

WA: When you came to West End in 1972, was it 50-50 black and white students?

SC: I believe that's correct. I know that during the better part of my time at West End, it was 50-50. And during my time there, it had the feeling of utopia.

WA: Really?

SC: Yeah

WA: Tell me about that.

SC: Well, in the sense that—and again, of course, there was, I mean this definition or this view would have varied depending on the person to whom you asked it, I suppose—but from my vantage point, particularly junior and senior years, it seemed that there were blacks at the school, there were whites at the school. There didn't seem to be the debates about who was going to be on the cheerleading squad, who was going to be a majorette, who was going to be student government president or vice president. There didn't seem to be any of that. There seemed to be blacks and whites in the school together, and from my vantage point, there didn't appear to be any problems with that. Now I was aware of some number of students who opted to go to someplace called

Central Park Christian, and I frankly didn't know where or what that was or why they would choose to go there.

WA: And were those black or white students?

SC: Those were white students. In hindsight I wonder if it was as much them choosing to go as much as their parents making the choice. Ultimately, of course, they were removed from the equation. But as I said, during the time that I was there, those deletions seemed to be minimal.

WA: And so during your four years it was pretty much evenly balanced in terms of races in the student body.

SC: Yes

WA: There wasn't a big change one way or the other.

SC: Correct, correct.

WA: And were the teachers integrated 50-50?

SC: I believe so, I believe so. I suppose I should have done a little bit of homework looking at my school annual to kind of confirm that, but I believe that was correct or, at the very least, was moving in that direction.

WA: Students were coming from your neighborhood and also across the tracks now.

SC: No, not to confuse. My neighborhood would have been about the eastern most point from which West End students were coming. Indeed, there was a bus, a 'special' as they called it, that we could board to get to and from school. Generally the student population from West End came from the actual community of West End and its component neighborhoods. [pause] I don't recall, I don't think there was much beyond

West End, in terms of students beyond West End going to West End, because again you had other high schools which bordered the West End enrollment area. Parker High School to the—I suppose Parker would be more to the north and east I suppose. You had, not Ullman High School, but you had Jones Valley High School to the immediate west. You didn't really have a school zone to the south—wait, no I take that back. At that point I guess you would have had Ramsey High School, which at that point would have had an enrollment zone. So between—you had enough other schools with enrollment zones where West End High School would not have had to have drawn from beyond the areas about which I just spoke of.

WA: And your neighborhood was middle-class, upper-middle class?

SC: I'd say middle-class to upper-middle-class, yes.

WA: And what about the West End neighborhood in terms of income?

SC: Um [pause] And again this is the perspective of someone, looking back, who was in high school, and of course when one is in high school, one's concept of money is a little bit fuzzy, but I think I'm safe in saying the West End was generally a middle-class neighborhood at that time. The general West End area was generally middle-class, yes.

WA: And was West End mostly white at that time?

SC: West End had historically been white, and I think it was still mostly white, particularly in '72 when I got there. West End was, for some number of individuals, the Promise Land. I mean, recall individuals from our church, adults to me at that time, who moved to West End and spoke of it in such glowing terms, as in 'Okay, I've moved to West End!' It was almost as though you were part of the prayer that some people, or the

soliloquy might issue in church, that we're living in houses that we used to clean. More than a few people obviously had to clean houses, and some number of the houses they might have cleaned might have very well been in West End.

WA: Tell me about your first few days at West End in the fall of 1972.

SC: Safe to say that I would have been probably the very definition of geek: geek, nerd, that guy who on the blacktop of someone's school yard would have been the last guy picked, if picked at all, to play basketball. I am not the athlete, which is why I sometimes wonder from where my wife and I got our son—or daughter, for that matter. No, I was strictly into academics, and I remember that first day of going to high school, my mom dressing me in kind of a—it was not a solid vest, but it was kind of a checkered vest with a tie and what have you. And I remember thinking how [pause] well, actually I don't know. On the one hand I felt that some normal people would feel me odd to dress that way, and in another way I felt, 'Okay, this is just how I'm dressed.' As I said, I was already used to being somewhat different in the manner that I spoke, so dressing somewhat differently didn't bother me too greatly either.

WA: And so on your first day, can you remember anything else about your first day? A class, or the people that you're meeting, or—

SC: I had been forewarned that I should not accept or buy any tickets from anybody who told me, 'This is how you go to get to the elevator at the school.' The inside joke there is that the school has no elevator, but a standard joke that would be played on incoming freshman was to have them looking for this elevator that did not exist: 'Well he told me to go here, and turn here, and it would be right here, and I don't see it!' Well, that's because it's not here.

WA: About how many students were in your freshman class?

SC: [pause] I'm—and this is a guess, this is really really a guess—I'm guessing somewhere in the neighborhood of 375 to 400 students.

WA: Okay. And so there were about over a thousand in the school?

SC: I guess that would have been about right, yes.

WA: So what kind of classes were you taking? Were you in AP classes?

SC: They weren't called AP at the time, of course, but yes. I was taking the college preparatory courses and such. In fact, I was one of two individuals who was denoted as freshman of the year, which frankly shocked me. I didn't know that there was such a distinction! I do remember that day deciding I was going to wear one thing, and my mom trying to impress upon me to wear something else, and I think in this particular instance I kind of said, 'No, this is what I'm going to wear,' not realizing that I would be on display before the entire student body.

WA: For the ceremony for freshman of the year

SC: Yes

WA: And so what did you wear?

SC: You know there was nothing particularly outrageous, but you know it was like a shirt that was meant to be worn with the tail out and what have you. Long sleeved. I don't remember if it was silk or material. But it was not what my mom would have preferred me to wear. But unable to tell me, 'Okay, I need you to dress up because you're going to be honored,' that wouldn't—she just said 'Okay fine, go.'

WA: So what were some of your favorite classes that year?

SC: Favorite classes that year [pause] I don't know if I'd call it my favorite class, one of my classes was ROTC. And that dates back to my having been at West Center Street and having a social studies teacher, Robert Osbourn, who looked at me with some amount of glee saying, 'I can't wait for you to get into a P.E. class with those bony legs of yours out in gym shorts.' And I swore to myself that day, 'You will never see me in gym shorts!' Hence my decision to take ROTC [Laughter]. Now again in hindsight, who knows what kind of fantastic athlete I might have been had I not been swayed to avoid that. We will never know.

WA: Tell me about, thinking about all four years of high school experience, what were your teachers like? And did you have black and white teachers, and were there any favorites or least favorites?

SC: Let's see. I had black and white teachers, yes. Did I have favorites? [pause]

WA: Or least favorites.

SC: I don't know if I had least favorites. I tended to be a fairly even-keeled individual who tried to do my work and tended not to give my instructors reason to dislike me. I think, in hindsight, one of my favorite teachers is the one who actually gave me my only flunk/failing grades in high school. As I said, I had done well my freshman year, and I had during the summer following that, I had taken an eleventh grade American history course and aced it as well, so I was feeling pretty good about myself. I went back in the fall to sign up for classes and was going to sign up for advanced biology, a sophomore level course. It was not available at that particular time. I don't remember if the course was full or what have you, but it was not available. The individual who was head of the science department said, 'Well advanced biology's not

available, but you can take chemistry. Now you're smart, you can handle it, but you're gonna think about it.' I went and thought about it, and I thought, 'Yeah, I'm smart, I can handle it.' So I signed up for it and failed the first grading period, because I simply was not geared to the challenge that was before me. I was taking the course from Jefferson Powell, who incredibly is still at West End today. I don't say 'incredibly' like he is some decrepit individual. It's just I think it's safe to say that virtually if not everybody who had been on the faculty back at that time has since moved on. He continues to be there as almost like a cornerstone that will not be moved. But he's an individual—I don't know if he was, or is, rather, an actual minister—he might be, but he is an individual whose religious convictions are quite evident. I remember that I made, again like I said, the F that first grading period, got a C the next, then got another F, then made a couple of As. And then, on the final exam, I did well enough where he said in conversation with me, 'I could give you a B, but you and I both know that you only deserve a C.' And I couldn't argue with him. I could not argue with him. I had to respect him because that was an appropriate assessment. Had I done what I should have done, I would have had the appropriate grade. I remember him fondly.

Peggy Headly was a Spanish teacher of mine, I remember well. Obviously, individuals from whom I took journalism and English courses, in particular of course, Gloria Dennard—I had her with journalism initially. I didn't have her as long as I would have liked to have because she ultimately kind of shifted gears and went into library science, a position which she holds now with the Jefferson High School system. And Barbara Chapman, an English teacher of mine who was, I guess, probably my favorite looking back on it.

WA: So tell me why she's your favorite, looking back on it.

SC: I suppose because there was kind of something in the way that she -- can we stop for a second?

[Recorder is turned off and then back on]

SC: Ms. Chapman was probably my favorite teacher because—I'm not sure if I can even find the right words for it. For one thing, English was always a favorite of mine. Again, as I said, my father's a Baptist minister, and I had long done my own kind of impromptu study of spoken word, particularly as it related to sermons that would be given: whatever the inflection that ministers would use in making their point or how they might look to build the message. And she tended to kind of tap into that in the presentation she was able to make in teaching English class. It was not strictly the adjectives and adverbs agreeing with which I had dealt in some number of other English classes. But she kind of allowed us to transcend that to some degree, and I enjoyed that.

WA: And had she been teaching at West End for long?

SC: I [pause] again, she was one of the black teachers [pause] I don't, I believe she had been there at least from '70 or thereabouts. I'd imagine she had gotten there around that time.

WA: And so she was teaching rhetoric, or was it just in reading books and studying the language, grammar—

SC: Well there was some grammar and there was definitely some literature in it as well. This was a point, I think as part of my senior year, where we were doing some term papers and the like, which tended to be more detailed, more intricate work, as opposed to simply, I don't want to say regurgitating, but simply giving back what we had

been given. This was a point where you were expected to put some real thought into the work that you were writing, which to a degree is kind of precursive to the work that I do now in that, one must build a story, one must research it, one must get the appropriate details to kind of go into it and develop it in a manner that it'll both be entertaining as well as informative. Maybe more so the former than the latter, but the ability to meld the two () as possible. [Pause] Okay.

WA: So tell me about your participation in journalism. When did you start? What were you doing? What teachers were you working with? Who else was working with you?

SC: I actually wanted to—Well let me back up. My participation in journalism actually goes back pre-West End. I mentioned that English teacher of mine, Sarah Stewart, who had made the now-infamous statement that no one uses proper grammar all the time. She happened to be my eighth grade English teacher, and one of the things she decided to do to enhance the class was to form a school newspaper. And the criteria was that if you made an A that particular grading period, you got to be one of the editors of the paper. If you made a B that particular grading period, you got to be one of the reporters. Throughout that year I made As in English, except for that one—I made a B. Best B I ever made, because it gave me an opportunity to be a reporter. More specifically, it gave me an opportunity to be nosey. It gave me a chance to ask questions. People didn't necessarily like the questions I asked, and I didn't care! Because I had a license to ask the questions and then to report the responses.

WA: So what kind of questions?

SC: [Sigh] They weren't necessarily biting or ugly, per se. I think that may have been a byproduct of being from a minister's household, we had a certain sense of what was nice and not nice. But let's say, for instance, if there were a school play, I might actually ask people an honest opinion about that play or some particular aspect of school life at that point. Which, as I said, might have been welcome, might not have been welcome, but still I had a license to ask. This was as an eighth grader, and I kind of decided, 'Okay, I like this. I think I'd like to be able to pursue this.' As a freshman, I didn't have time. Between the classes I was taking and some other conflicts, I couldn't do it then. Sophomore year, some other conflicts. Well actually, I'm sorry, as a freshman, they didn't allow freshman to be on the newspaper staff; you were supposed to get yourself established. Sophomore year, I was taking chemistry as I said, couldn't do it. Junior year some other conflict—still couldn't do it. Finally as a senior I decided, 'I really want to try this,' so the first thing that I put down on my schedule was journalism. And during that year I wrote news stories, I wrote features stories, I typed other people's stories. I wrote sports stories, like I said general features stories, I sold ads, I wrecked my car. All of this in pursuit of journalism.

WA: You wrecked your car in pursuit of journalism.

SC: Well, yes.

WA: [Laughter]

SC: Well again—as I will readily acknowledge today, a newspaper has to have advertising or it does not survive. I sold an ad to a fellow who operated a chicken establishment several blocks from the school, and I had driven there to pick up the ad,

and of course the money that came along with it. And I'm not sure exactly where my mind was, but it was not on the stop sign I ran.

WA: Uh oh

SC: But it was on the vehicle that was approaching from the other side. And of course—did I mention that I had neglected to check out of school?. I was so fired up about doing this that I had neglected to go through that little prerequisite of actually saying, 'I'm leaving campus now, and I'll be back.' So I got in a little bit of trouble for that. But again, it was just something that I really, really wanted to do and that I really enjoyed doing.

WA: So tell me about the other students who were working on the newspaper.

SC: I don't think that there was the same zeal for it, there was almost lust for it, that I had. For them it was a school activity, which is a normal way of viewing it. It was something to do, something to impart some of the goings on of the school, something that might go on a resume as a school activity. But maybe no deeper than that. I simply, I think I'd seen one too many episodes of *Lou Grant* and saw myself as one of the reporters who reported to Lou each and every day. Odd they only had two reporters who ever did anything on that show, isn't it?

WA: [Laughter]. So while you were out gathering the stories, did you make friends with anyone else on the newspaper staff?

SC: Well, let's see. Yeah, I mean there were [Pause]. I'm ashamed to say, it's hard for me to remember. I remember one fellow, Andre Willis—was Andre on the newspaper staff? Yeah, Andre was on the newspaper staff. I remember Andre not so much because he was on the newspaper staff as much as he and I were among three

people who ran for student body vice president. In fact, I distinctly remember once I'd signed up—actually back up. I'd decided to run, not so much on a whim, but to prove to myself that I could do something other than or be seen in a manner other than I was generally seen. I remember—

WA: Which was what?

SC: Well I remember being in a Spanish class with Miss. Headly, and she asked if anyone was going to run for student body, for student government office. And a friend of mine from elementary school, Kenneth Harrington made the observation that if there were office for chaplains, Solomon would win hands down. Now I was both honored and annoyed. Honored that I was seen as an upright individual who could fill that role, but annoyed that I was viewed as someone who was only good for giving a good prayer. So I decided that I am going to run as SGA vice president. Running against me was Andre Willis and Stewart—I can not remember Stewart's name. I'll come back to Stewart. And the dynamics, or maybe I should say the demographics of the ballot, made it appear to me that I was destined for defeat.

WA: Why?

SC: Well as I looked at it, I had no constituents, or at least none that I had of my own. You see, I'm black and Andre's black. Stewart is white. I was ROTC, so was Stewart. I was on the newspaper staff, so was Andre, and Stewart was on the yearbook staff. I couldn't even depend on my own homeroom because Andre was in my homeroom! I had already decided that I had lost this race, and when the final ballot comes in and it shows me to have lost, I'm going to graciously offer to take my two victors, because there'd be Victor A and Victor B, I'd be the lone loser in this race, and I

would graciously offer to take them to McDonalds for a meal. Saying good job or whatever. But a funny thing happened on the way to the ballot box. Around the same time as the SGA elections, there was going to be, there was planned rather, a series of plays that was going to be done at West End. It was going to be a major production, it would be done in the evening, it would sell tickets, what have you. And the part of the production, West End Follies, that was going to be like the highlight, was going to be a version of the TV program *Good Times*, and the key was to get someone to play that lead character. No, not the father or the mother, but instead the wisecracking son, played by Jimmy Walker. And they had considered a rather lanky basketball player, but rather than going to him, they chose me. They asked me if I'd be willing to do it. To promote West End Follies, we gave the student body snippets from the various plays—just enough to kind of whet their appetite. For *Good Times*, which I wrote, we wouldn't do an actual scene or anything such, but instead, I would simply walk on stage [pause] wearing red long johns and a blue jean cap, walking to the microphone, clap my hands, and then would say loudly the name of a certain explosive. Don't say it!

WA: [Laughter]

SC: Don't say it. Even now, I break out in cold sweats at the very utterance of that explosive. Don't say it!

WA: So this was sort of scary to have to do this.

SC: Well actually, it wasn't scary. I mean, I just kind of went in character and just did that. The evening after having just done this before two sessions of assemblies promoting West End Follies, a couple of freshman approached me at a convenience store down the street from the high school. 'You're the guy who plays JJ, aren't you?'

'Yeah.' 'And you're running for SGA vice president, aren't you?' 'Well, yes.' 'We're gonna vote for you!' And the wheels started turning in my head. If a couple of dumb freshman—and obviously I use the term 'dumb' because they're not thinking about the political process or the value of the candidate, but just what role he plays—if a couple of dumb freshman are going to vote for me for that reason alone, then maybe, maybe I can work this. [Pause] Now there was a limit to the number of big signs that you could post at the school—you could only put up so many big placards, posterboards, whatever. There was no limit to the number of small signs that you posted in the school. And I wallpapered the school: 'Vote the JJ Way.' 'Solomon is "that explosive".' When the final ballot came in, I won by seven votes.

WA: Wow [Pause]

SC: Still not quite sure how I did that [Laughter]

WA: And was your play a hit?

SC: The play went very nicely. The play went very, very nicely, yes. I don't think I was to quit my day job to go into theatrics, but for that moment, it was good.

WA: So did you know many students when you moved to West End? Your elementary school wasn't very big, so were there other students coming in who you'd known in elementary school or from the neighborhood?

SC: There were students whom I knew from my elementary school. Likewise, there were other students who were a year or two older than me who I knew or who knew my sister or my family. So I [pause] ... granted, West End was a much, much larger place than my elementary school, but after having been there for a week or two, it felt fairly normal. It didn't seem so thoroughly undaunting a task to try to, say, fit in there. I

look now at students, say at a Hoover High School, which dwarfs West End now, and wonder—I've wondered more than a few times—how kids find their niche there when they're so many, many students there. No, West End seemed—home.

WA: Like home. And so, tell me about some of the friends you made when you came to West End.

SC: Let's see [pause]. Among them there was Scotty Colson who is, even now, the assistant to the mayor of Birmingham. Scotty [pause] is white, but that [pause] I don't remember that ever being a subject of any discussion. I mean, he was Scotty, I was me, and we were friends. There was absolutely no—nothing at all. We both were in ROTC, perhaps for the same reason, I don't know. He was even taller than me, and perhaps had a similar wish to avoid being seen in gym shorts. I don't know, I never heard him express that. And of course there was Scotty, a friend of mine from elementary school, actually even pre-elementary school, Ronald Edwards, who wound up being the SGA president to my vice president. There's Mitchell Smith, another friend of mine from elementary school. There were other individuals as well. There were a number of people I know; I guess I should have maybe, say, taken some notes of names so I could drop some here. But suffice to say, there were a number of people I knew, black and white, Pam Nobles being one who comes to my mind, who were just comfortable friends. And as I said, back at that time, West End seemed like a good place to be.

WA: And do you think that your feeling about that is representative of the student body as a whole? I mean, do you think that's pretty typical assessment?

SC: I think so. I think so. Again, there would probably be some people who either thought themselves or expressing the feelings of parents or grandparents by whom they were raised, with whom they spent time, that there was a better day some number of years prior—before blacks walked the halls, before there was any effort to balance representation on the student government, or on the cheerleading squad, or anything like that. I'm sure there were some people who felt, who longed for the day where there was not any attention given to people of color. But generally, I didn't experience that. If it was there, it was camouflaged so that I didn't know it was there. But as I said, I think the vast majority of individuals, black and white, would agree with me in that assessment.

WA: And the teachers' attitudes were positive about desegregation? The teachers who'd been moved to West End and also maybe ones who had stayed?

SC: It seemed to be a solid feeling that the school had been a good school, that the school was then a good school, that the school would be a good school. As best I could tell, they did nothing to change their approach to education, they simply continued to do what they did. Unfortunately, of course, utopia doesn't last forever.

WA: Go on, what do you mean?

SC: Well the West End High School that is present today is not the West End High School that I attended. I mean it is the same building. You still have Jefferson Powell teaching chemistry. But there is a much, much different mindset. If I tell someone—in fact I remember telling someone some number of years ago that I attended and had graduated from West End High School. The person looked at me with an amount of awe, as in 'How did you survive this ghetto, this school?' And I'm thinking, 'West End isn't that.' Or it at least wasn't that. And I think that the school has gone

through some number of changes since then, and it may be somewhat better now. There was a point where the general West End community has slipped greatly, and the school was a reflection of that.

START OF TAPE 1, SIDE B

SC: Where were we?

WA: We were talking about how West End was for your parents generation, a long time ago.

SC: It was utopia, but as time passed—

[Interruption by someone getting ice]

SC: But as time passed, you had another set of individuals who were moving into West End. Extremely young parents, some single parents. Perhaps some people whose moral fiber was not as the previous people's had been. Back in the days when I was at West End, I know my father was always, my parents were always involved in the PTA. In fact, throughout elementary school and on through high school, my parents were always there. I remember them always struggling to try to get other people involved, but their struggles paled by comparison to the struggles of others who followed them. I think that what happened with West End after our graduation, or at the very least maybe two or three years following that, the flight of whites increased to the point where West End was no longer that utopia, that balance, that melting pot of racial ideas. Further, you had more people of color who were choosing to go elsewhere, for whom West End was no longer the place where they wanted to be. And in their place were left people who did not have

the same standards as those who had been there before. And as those standards began to slip, so too did West End the community and thus West End the high school.

WA: And that was late seventies and into the eighties?

SC: Late seventies and into the eighties, yes.

WA: And then it changed after that? You said there was—

SC: Of late, I believe there to have been some amount of change. West End is still not where it was when I was there. I don't know if it will ever be. I don't think it is as low as it was in its darkest days since then. It still has a ways to go to climb.

WA: What about traditions at West End? What were some of the school traditions when you came to West End, and did they change through the desegregation process or did they remain the same?

SC: If they changed, I was not aware of the change. I mean, there was—I think there was a homecoming bonfire. There were homecoming events and such as that, other things that took place, which as far as I know were continuations of what had been in place before. There was an annual pageant of sorts: A Mr. Debonair, and I forget what the female equivalent was. Essentially, these individuals would be judged based on their poise and their ability to carry themselves on stage, and addressing certain questions, and what have you. So there were things like that which were done at West End. As I said, I worked for the school newspaper, the *Welion*—or as some people would say 'We Lion,' West End Lion. I mentioned that being something that might go on someone's resume. The yearbook in those days was the *Resume*; that was the name of the yearbook. I don't know if West End has a yearbook now, like so many Birmingham high schools. I don't know, in fact I doubt, that West End has a school newspaper. If I were at West End now,

I don't know if I would have [pause] wound up where I am now, because I would not have gained any kind of foothold into journalism or posing the questions that ultimately posed—definitely not on that level, which ultimately bridged the gap between my being inquisitive in grade school to pursuing it in college.

WA: Right. So let's continue with that. Tell me where you went to college and how you were involved in journalism in college.

SC: I went to Birmingham Southern, Birmingham Southern College. I initially was going to go to Clark College in Atlanta, but Clark apparently had pretty bad book-keeping in those days, in that I contacted them with an application for a scholarship. Actually, I applied for a scholarship and I said, 'Well, please send me an application for admission.' They sent me back an application for a scholarship and asked me to please send them my application for admission. I said, 'Well, no, I don't have it. I need you to send me that.' And I went back and forth with them on this, and they could never quite get it right. And this was getting close to the end of the summer, or at least late enough in the summer that I wanted to have something secured as to where I was going to be going to school. Almost on a whim, I showed up at Birmingham Southern and applied, and before I knew it, I had been accepted. I said, 'I guess this is where I'm meant to be!'

When I got to Birmingham Southern, the school newspaper there was called *The Southerner*. The name didn't particularly feel good to me, and there was something about the way that the paper was being done back then, or something or other, I don't remember just what it was, that just didn't feel quite right to me. So I opted not to write for that paper. Instead there was an underground paper at UAB [University of Alabama

at Birmingham] called *The Insurrection Press*, a fairly racy name, which made it very difficult to get advertising.

WA: [Laughter]

SC: To the point where they ultimately changed the name to *The Independent Press*, which helped a little bit before it finally went under. But I was able to do some writing for them, mostly sports and what have you. I took some pictures of some events and covered other stuff for them. When it folded—at around this time they made some changes at Birmingham Southern's paper, changed it's name to *The Hill Top News*, and the folks who were in charge of it had a different mindset than the others who had preceded them. I latched onto that and continued to write for their paper.

During my senior year of high school, I had pursued employment at the *Birmingham News*. Specifically, I called down to the news and asked if the managing editor might be available on that Saturday. He would be, and I ultimately came down and parked outside—I left my younger brother in the car, I said 'You stay here!' He was two years my junior—and I came up to the managing editor, a fellow who was then Jim Jacobson. He and I spoke for a while, and he told me that perhaps what I needed to do was get a job as a copy clerk for the news, where I could deliver things around the newsroom, see how things operated. And we said our goodbyes, and I pretty much forgot about it.

Within a few weeks of that, I was involved in a program with Birmingham schools—a pilot program that unfortunately didn't survive—called The Excellence Program. It was an opportunity for students who were in the upper percentages of their classes—their grade-level classes—to leave their school, go to another site, and while

gaining some studies, would be aloud to basically specialize in their area of interest.

Now, since this was a new program, so that parents would not feel that their kids were just skipping school, the first day of it, the parents were invited to attend with the student. So I was there with my parents and, as it turned out, Jim Jacobson was there with his son, who was also there. Now if I saw him, I didn't recognize him or didn't connect, but he saw me and remembered me. Within a week or two of that, I get phone calls at home and at school asking me to call the *Birmingham News*. I remember Joe Strong, his secretary at that point, asking me when I called, 'Well, Son, are you still interested in that position as a copy clerk?' What are you kidding? 'Well, yes, yes, I think I'm still interested, yes.' So I came down, put in my application. There were dozens of other people who were applying, but it was already mine. And during that time, for the better part of three years, I worked primarily on weekends as a copy clerk delivering stuff around the news room while also doing some occasional sports coverage, maybe covering an occasional small college football or basketball game, covering some high school events, what have you. My theory was that, if I have my foot in the door, it might be more difficult for the *News* to tell me no when I ultimately applied for a job.

After three years, I applied for a summer internship, was able to get that. I interned for that summer. Then, during my senior year, I worked weekends, not as a copy clerk, but as a reporter on Saturdays and Sundays, and then, just before graduation, was offered a full time position here at the *News*.

WA: And have been here ever since.

SC: And have been here ever since. That would be—let's see, carry the one, that would be twenty-five years now.

WA: Wow. That's a great story. So, it's about 3:15, so can we do the final, general questions?

SC: We can, yes.

WA: So the general questions we ask are about school desegregation. So when you first entered high school, what did you consider the goals of school desegregation to be?

SC: I think I thought that the goal was to make education no longer separate but equal. And toward that end, it was successful in that it brought—it did away with the dual system of having a black school and a white school. It put students under the same roof and allowed them to be exposed to the same things, and thus have the same opportunities. The two pitfalls that are there, however: one is that, for better or worse, the black schools that had existed prior to desegregation, or at least some number of them, anyway—West Center Street being one example—had that drive among the faculty that we are going to prepare our students to overcome, that we are going to push our students using the theory that it's not good enough to be good enough. A byproduct, not necessarily a good one, of desegregation, is that you no longer had that drive that you've got to be better than. Or at least, I think you had it for a time, again during that utopian period when I was there at West End. But as time past—and I think that's part of the problem with the generation of today, that being so far removed from the days when things were separate, the enemy is not without, the enemy is within; the enemy being complacency. That I can get it if I want, I just choose not to. As opposed to the days when I was coming up in grade school, and even in high school, where it was really instilled in us that, if you're going to succeed, you've got to push, you've got to strive for

more. It's not good enough to be good enough. I think now adays you have too many kids who believe that almost good enough is good enough. Did I make both my points? I'm not sure if I did. I think I did.

WA: I think so.

SC: Okay, okay.

WA: So, what do you consider the goals of school desegregation to be today, looking back from today?

SC: Looking back from today, I think the goal would be the same, but the challenge is made all the more difficult by the reality that, in those days, people basically played the hand that they were dealt, in that this is where we live, and these are the schools where our children will go. Some number of people did that. We now live in a society where some number of people can choose not to. They can choose to either leave the community where they have been and go to another community, another municipality, another school district, and put their kids there. Or they can leave the public environment altogether and go to a private school. And thus you're left with a school that, while it is desegregated and will thus allow people of all races and backgrounds to attend, if we're devoid of anybody of another race, are you desegregated? And, again, it's by no fault of anyone who's in the administration. It's just that the people who would be part of this have removed themselves from the equation. And again, not just people of color, not just people who are white, but people of color as well, who realize that only—I remember one of the former school superintendents since I graduated from West End, Cleveland Hammonds, speaking to some number of students—not students, but parents, rather—as he made proposals of how the school

system might be changed, how it might be improved. I think he may have said that if you give me five years, give me six years, we will get the test scores up, we will improve the facilities, we will improve the standards, we'll make the school system what you want it to be. They said, 'Okay, Cleveland, that sounds good. But I've got a kid in school now. What are you going to do for my student in school now?' And that is the impossible question, or at least an extremely difficult question that every superintendent has faced. Yes, you have this grand idea of where the system can go, but can you mortgage the present to pay for the future? And obviously, you can't, so-- And a number of individuals of all backgrounds, realizing that their children will only be children for a finite amount of time, will choose not to pull from that deck, but pull from another deck and pull themselves out of the Birmingham School system and out of, say, West End High School, for instance.

WA: And that goes to my third question, which is do you feel like the goals of desegregation have been achieved?

SC: On paper, yes. On paper yes, but again it comes down to choice. It comes down to choice. And again, you can go to some number of school systems outside of Birmingham proper, and you will find black students and white students. Not necessarily a fifty percent proportion, but you will find black students and white students, because that is where some number of parents want to see their students, their children. Because they see success at that school, or at those schools. The challenge of a West End and other schools in the Birmingham public school system is for them to be able to find success, for people to be able to see success there and to be able to envision that success being sustained through the educational periods of their children. I'm not sure how you

accomplish that. I look forward to seeing the day that they are able to, not just spin it, but actually achieve it. Again, some number of things can be spun, some number of things can be said. I look forward to the day when it is actually accomplished, and you actually have people who are clamoring for a spot in any Birmingham school, not just a couple.

WA: If you had it to do over again, would you go to a desegregated school?

SC: Yes. Very definitely. I would add that one of the parameters that my wife had—that I had placed—not so much on my wife, but in our discussions of where we would raise our children, I wanted them to be in an area where they would be exposed not just to one mindset or one set of people, not just people like themselves. Because the world is not just people like themselves. The world is comprised of people of all races, creeds, colors, nationalities. And one cannot begin too soon learning that and being able to cope with that.

WA: Did you talk with your children about your experiences in high school?

SC: Some, some. Again, somehow I thought that it might be somewhat boring—sounding like some cantankerous old man saying ‘Oh back in my day we did this,’ whatever. You know the stereotypical forty mile walk to school through the snow. Did not do that, but still. And maybe I cheated them out of something by not having told them a bit about that, or maybe some of the things, not with which we dealt, that maybe immediately preceded my time in high school, and such as that.

WA: So where did your children go to school? Are going to school?

SC: [Pause]. Currently we live at Hoover, and we have not been there that long. We’ve only been there about three years now. Up until three years ago, I had kind of held tightly to the idea that—I had wanted to hold onto being in Birmingham. I suppose

tie it back to my days at West End, hoping that, okay there's some deterioration in the school system, but we can continue to find some oases within the school system where we can get what we want, what we feel we need. We were able to do that for a time, but ultimately we got to a point where getting what we wanted in terms of education became, I won't say it was impossible to get, it was more difficult to get in the public setting, it was definitely more difficult to get and maintain. And let me just explain that our daughter went to school at Ramsey High School, back at that point, which among Birmingham schools has the best reputation among the high schools. She had gone to Putnam Middle School, which had at one point the reputation of being the standard bearer among Birmingham middle schools, but has long since lost that reputation. Our son would have been zoned to go to Putnam, and [pause] we didn't—just because I knew there would be a sense of complacency among some number of students there, did not want him there. I feared that he would lapse into that same sense of nonchalance that I wanted kind of to avoid. A friend of mine steered us to Huffman Middle School, which is a school that did not have—I think still does not have—extracurricular activities outside of band—as a place where he might be able to go and really get a good education and be able to focus. And I really liked Huffman Middle. I really, really liked it. The one thing I didn't like was the daily drive of me taking my son from Crestwood all the way out to Roebuck to school, and then coming to work, and then driving all the way back out there to get him, and then back. That got old, for me at the very least, to the point where, at the end of that school year-- Plus there was discussion at that time that Birmingham was not going to allow out of zone transfers, which of course, he was not going to a school to which he was zoned, thus he would wind up at the school where we didn't

really want him to be. Consequently we at that point weighed the decision of moving and wound up where we are now at Hoover.

WA: For Birmingham as a whole—I've got three more questions—For Birmingham as a whole, what do you think that the benefits and drawbacks of school desegregation have been?

SC: The benefit very definitely is an opportunity to separate itself, separate Birmingham from its darkest of pasts. That Birmingham was, and in some people's minds still is, 'Bomingham': that place where black churches, homes of people of color, were bombed for no reason other than the fact that they were people of color. That it was a war zone, at least in black communities. That it was a place where people of color might very well be beaten as much as they might walk across the street. It was a place of dogs and fire hoses—that reputation. Desegregating the schools was one step in the effort to separate Birmingham from that dark past. Is there a downside to it? I don't think that there is a downside to desegregating the schools, no, outside of the point I made before about maybe that loss of the singular mission for black kids in particular. But I don't think that you could have that today. I think that black kids today need to be in an environment that is not unique unto themselves. They need to be in an environment that is open to people of all races, and thus being able to learn to cope with and adapt to all people. But again, it's been noted before, while Birmingham schools are desegregated on paper, the choice is still there for people not to live in Birmingham, and as a result, you may not be as desegregated as it could be if the system were such that people would actually choose to be there.

WA: And the last question is, is there anything that I haven't asked you about your time at West End or about school desegregation in general that you think is important that we should talk about?

SC: Nothing comes to mind right now. I cannot recall anything upon which we have not touched that we should have.

WA: Okay, well thank you so much.

SC: You're welcome.