

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

NOTES AND LOG - AL JONES

Interviewee: Al Jones

Interviewer: Amanda Covington

Date: 12 March 1999

Location: Mooresville, N.C.

Tape No.: (cassette 1 of 1)  
(approximately 25 minutes)

Notes: This interview took place in Mr. Jones' office at the Park View Elementary School

in Mooresville, N.C. Mr. Jones currently serves as the principal of the school, and he was employed as a teacher and coach in Mooresville during the time of school desegregation. Although not a native of Mooresville, he moved to the city around the time of desegregation and his comments were extremely valuable as an observer of the activities in Mooresville at the time. His involvement with students on the court, field, and in the classroom also made his interview very important for this project.

The interview went very smoothly. Mr. Jones supplemented his factual commentary with interesting and insightful stories of school life in Mooresville during public school desegregation. He emphasized the idea that interaction between the black and white communities and the effectiveness of school administrators made Mooresville's transition as smooth as possible. Mr. Jones was also extremely helpful in suggesting names of other community members who would have insight on this era and subject, including his former students and players.

Notes: The interview is on the "B" side of the cassette used for Covington's Miriam Parrot interview. The last two or three minutes of this interview were the victims of "technical difficulties" of sound black-outs.

## LOG

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

Question about being a native of Mooresville. Mr. Jones is a native of Union Grove, in the northern part of Iredell County. He came to Mooresville in 1966 to serve as a school teacher at the Jr. High School. He taught health, physical education, and some science courses.

Question about first impressions of Mooresville during this time and how it's changed today. Mr. Jones comments on how Mooresville was a "small town" during the 1960's with one school system and one African American union school for grades 1-12. It was during Mr. Jones' first year at Mooresville that the plans for desegregation of the public schools began. In 1967 the plan to completely integrate the school began. At this time Dunbar, the black school, was made into an elementary school, and Park and South also served as elementary schools.

Mr. Jones mentions some of the key teachers from Dunbar at this time - Mrs. Atwater and Mrs. Cross. Mr. Jones points out the good teachers during the time of desegregation - the teachers would meet and work together on their plans. Mr. Jones said that he experienced very few problems with his students at the junior high. He mentions one of his first black basketball players, Paul Mayhew, who helped to make the transition "smooth" for other African-American students to participate in sports. Mr. Jones said Mayhew "fit right in with the guys". He notes that other coaches did not experience as smooth a transition as he did in regards to the integration of sports teams.

Discussion about the new junior high school built on Magnolia St. Another black student, Melton Johnson [see Melton Johnson interview by Covington], played football for Jones. As with Mayhew, Johnson helped and encouraged other black students to become involved in sports at the junior high school. Mr. Jones talks about the high quality of the black teachers at the time of integration. These teachers fit in well with the white staff, and their vigorous demands and teaching style also suited the white students. Comments about Dr. Morgan, the superintendent of schools at the time, who would listen to his faculty and respond to their comments. Also noted were the excellent principals during the time of desegregation. Mr. Woods at Dunbar was very strict but also compassionate. As with the faculty, all of the principals worked together.

Question about keeping Dunbar open as an elementary school. Mr. Jones emphasized the importance of community input for the school board's action during this time. The fact that Dunbar, the formerly all-black school, was made into an elementary school was one result of the board's willingness to listen to the community. Question about how this input was made - community-wide meetings were held. The meetings discussed of what type of students would best suit the size of Dunbar, and the decision was made to make the school open for elementary students. Dunbar needed to stay open for the reason of "community pride" within the black community. Superintendent Morgan had an open mind, also listened to Principal Woods a great deal.

Discussion about students and being a coach specifically at the time. He had few problems in his P.E. Classes, and reflected on interactions between races then and today:

"We really had no problems in physical education. The guys came right in and accepted each other and did things . . . I look at it now and wish that type of demeanor, socialization was what we have now. It's grown apart a little bit and I think that's because of the pressure of the moment . . . and then we were just getting our feet on the ground and we were working together and had really - I can remember no problems".

Discussion about skirmishes that did occur; Mr. Jones feels that they were not racially based. Question about white students attending school at Dunbar. Mr. Jones states that this was not a serious issue because of the integrated faculty at all schools. Dunbar was later made a "3-4" school so that all students would eventually attend it.

Question about daily life in Mooresville during this time, interaction between races on a daily basis. He mentions seeing African-Americans downtown on a Saturday afternoon. Mr. Jones said that since Mooresville was small and a textile town, many people of both races worked together at the textile plants. The movie theatre was segregated, and Mr. Jones felt that integration of public places began about the same time as school integration in Mooresville.

Question about coaching and playing other integrated and non-integrated schools. Mr. Jones states that integration never affected the playing schedule, but notes that opponents were

frequently not as integrated as Mooresville. Talks about one instance where opposing fans threw M&Ms from balcony at the team, yet Mr. Jones notes that this was not racially motivated, but aimed at both black and white players. He admits that racial slurs were sometimes heard.

Mr. Jones talks somewhat about his personal experience with African-American parents and the community. Notes that he attended college with other races, and felt he had a rapport with the black parents. In particular, he talked about the parents' appreciation of his strong discipline and demands of respect and practice attendance. Mr. Jones notes that all his parent problems in 26 years were with white parents.

Question about integrating other aspects of schools, including cheerleaders and student government. Mr. Jones notes that the cheerleaders were one of the only areas where problems did actually occur - problems were with girls in athletics in general. Notes that integration of the student government took two or three years, but felt that white students would vote for a black student. In the beginning, though, there were two vice presidents of the student government. When talking about the cheerleaders, Mr. Jones says that he would have rather just "stayed away" from the situation, but was somewhat in charge of the cheerleaders due to his coaching capacity. Explains process of selecting cheerleaders; they applied based on their grades and discipline issues, and then tried out. The judges were usually black and white teachers, high school cheerleaders, and frequently Davidson College cheerleaders. The principal of the time, Mr. Small, always insisted that there be at least one black cheerleader every year, although Mr. Jones said the number would fluctuate every year.

Talks about conflict with one African-American parent who had accused Jones of racism.

"I had one parent that was just very, very vocal about that and I had one of my former black players to hear, and just really jumped on her really good and let her know that Mr. Jones is not, that's your picture you're painting, and you need to keep that painting to yourself because that's not true. And ever since that point she's had a different - she's been different. . . ."

Question about comparing Mooresville to other districts where he has taught. He also taught in Albemarle and Chesterfield, South Carolina. He emphasizes the positive aspects

of a small school district:

"I think it's a great advantage because now, in our system, a student is a name, a student is a face, a student's not a number".

Comments on the success of sports teams at the high school, and camaraderie of the black and white students. Comments on his experiences in coaching at the high school from 1977-1991 and that the only conflicts with players come over issues of playing time, but this has only occurred a couple of times.

Mr. Jones concluded by talking about serving on the town board during the past six years, and the importance of an having "open door policy" for his district, which has both black and white residents. Comments on visiting each member of his district and knowing most of them at first ; now he says this is unlikely. Mr. Jones offered me assistance in contacting other individuals to interview.

End of interview.