

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

NOTES AND LOG - MIRIAM PARROTT

Interviewee: Miriam Parrott

Interviewer: Amanda Covington

Date: 8 March 1999

Location: Mooresville, N.C.

Tape No.: (cassette 1 of 1)
(approximately 30 minutes)

Notes: I met Mrs. Parrott at the Mooresville Library around 3 o'clock in the afternoon.

As we waited for another woman who might possibly be interviewed at the same time, we chatted about different subjects, including an explanation of the project, our hometowns, and Mrs. Parrott's life at the time of her move to Mooresville, around 1955.

After a few minutes, I decided to begin the official interview with Mrs. Parrott. The interview took place at a table in the children's section of the library. The correct forms were completed and the interview began with some recounting of Mrs. Parrott's previous comments from the conversation before the tape was rolling. Unfortunately, a tape malfunction occurred and the tape had stopped recording in the first few minutes. After some maneuvering, the first question was re-visited and no further "technical difficulties" occurred. Mrs. Parrott looked at the list of subjects I wanted to discuss and offered interesting stories and accounts of life in Mooresville during the early and mid-sixties. A mother of five, Mrs. Parrott returned to the teaching profession in 1965 in Kannapolis, North Carolina. After two years in Kannapolis, she taught in Mooresville, until 1993. She was sometimes reluctant to consider herself an expert on Mooresville since she was not technically a "native", but her observations as an "outsider" during the late 1950's were extremely valuable data on the time and place being studied.

When I had first completed the interview, I thought that the subject of integration was not specifically discussed enough, but listening to the taped interview made me realize that much information indirectly dealt with the topic and provided a rich source of community and historical information.

Note: Covington's interview with Al Jones is on the "B" side of this tape.

LOG

[Cassette 1 of 1, Side A]

Discusses her move to Mooresville in the mid-1950's. Problem with a shortage of housing, which forced her husband to live in a widow's home until a duplex was made available for her and first child to move. Even after the move, there was no phone installed in the house. The phone came in August, but Mrs. Parrott's second child was born in July.

Family then found a house four miles outside of town in Rowan County on a lake. Rented the house but was not allowed to buy it; heard that most people in Mooresville would only sell houses within their own family. States that this is different today. Later, the family purchased four acres from a woman who knew them and needed the money. Mrs. Parrott lives in this home today.

Talked about the eminence of Burlington Mills, which had been purchased in the mid-1950's by Burlington from a local family; her husband worked for Burlington. Purchase of the plant led to a big influx of new people in Mooresville, and a turn-over in the general manager. Mrs. Parrott's husband would come home and state "well, I made another week".

Describes the social aspects of Mooresville during this time period. She belonged to the "Burlington wives' bridge club" which had two rules: no talking about Burlington and that the group must remain nameless. Remembers bringing her children to the library, noting that people today remember her going and loading up the trunk of her car with books. Notes that the influx of new people led to a sense of "provincialism" and remarked that one woman said to Mrs. Parrott "oh, you're with Burlington". Describes the difficult process of "breaking in" and was asked to be a part of the matriarchal "book club" in Mooresville. One of the women in the group was the daughter-in-law of John Moore, who founded the town of Mooresville. Learned about the women in the group through the books they each chose to review. One lively discussion was on the subject of working women, where one woman finally admitted "paid work has more status than volunteer work".

Question about her return to teaching. Returned to her career in teaching after a nine-year break. Had given birth to five children in six years during this time. Took refresher

courses at Davidson and Catawba. First job in Kannapolis was actually given to her before she had completed her re-certification. After two years at Kannapolis, began teaching at Mooresville Senior High School. Taught four biology classes and one English class. Former student who still lives in Mooresville recently reminded her of one instance where she dropped marbles into a large glass jug each time a student said "uh" during a speech-making assignment.

Stated that she was very proud that Mooresville desegregated its schools "before we had to" and described integration as peaceful. Admits that she has taught good and bad students of both races. Recounts one black female pupil who is now a lawyer in Salisbury; also story of one black male student who worked with Parrott's husband at mill.

"One black boy that I had was a really charming, delightful guy and he graduated and then he went to work at Burlington for my husband; and my husband was a gentle giant and he told me once that he was bringing him along with little talks. But we were both really, really shocked when there was an accident and he was electrocuted and was killed. So my husband and I went to the black funeral home and everyone was so nice to us, and I said to my husband, you know, between the two of us we've got Mooresville covered because you're at Burlington and I'm at the high school. But it was a real touching time, anyway, I can still see him even though I've forgotten his name- I can still see him in my mind's eye. And he was a really neat kid and My husband said he had a lot of promise and that it really hurt."

Describes first day of teaching at high school; was wearing stockings and could feel the perspiration on legs because there was no air-conditioner. Class was all-white at that time. Story of Rita, one student who jumped out of seat as Parrott held garter snake in biology class.

After integration, describes school as "different". Noted problems of blacks "clustering". Tells of one black girl popular with both black and white students, but she told Mrs. Parrott that other black students had problems with her befriending white students. Parrott felt some black hesitancy, but it depended on their personality and how they were treated. Felt that sports opened many doors for race relations, partially due to the outstanding performance of black athletes and overall equality on the playing field. In her classroom, she explains

that her emphasis was "order and discipline, but fairness and also a bit of belly-laugh every so often". Felt that when she called down white students, the black students grinned, in particular when students were upper-class and had never been called down. Stated about blacks: "they knew that I was not going to give preferential treatment because of who someone's parents were, and I liked that, because I believe in fairness and human beings being human beings. That's just the way I was built". If white students did cause problems, she would talk one-on-one with them.

Talks about problems with parents, mostly over students not passing her course and not graduating. Recounts Larry, who passed one semester but not both; this occurred after the ending of the policy that failing one semester meant summer school but a diploma-like paper on regular graduation night.

Question about fellow teachers. Parrott was friends with first black teachers in Mooresville; Margie Byers, who taught biology and a business teacher who drove from Thomasville. Admits that some white teachers were distant, but Parrott and the black teacher's families would often have dinners at the Parrott's house. Byers had some problems with blacks who thought she was trying to be a "whitie".

Recounts story of another failing student. Numerous meetings were held with the superintendent until Parrott shouted "I am tired of this". She and Byers felt they had "been through the wars together."

Story of one black male teacher who was thought of poorly because of incompetence, not race. Fired later for showing adult movie in auto repair class; did not keep accurate gradebook. Parrott described it as embarrassing for the faculty.

Noted the academic excellence of Mooresville schools, which frequently placed at top of state academic lists. Mooresville Senior High was described by outsider as "the best public private school in the state". Also importance of faculty camaraderie.

In closing commentary, remembers story of first drive to Mooresville from York to look at town; "dismayed" because of Mooresville's ugliness. People in Mooresville think she's a native; many changes in Mooresville in past ten years, in physical town and attitudes; town is booming. Although not into racing, she lives near Ernie Irvin and taught Dale Earnhardt,

Jr. Feels racing brought money and recognition to Mooresville. Glad to see more diverse sources of employment; is not personally averse to new people. Tells of Mrs. Johnston, a Mooresville native who would be an excellent possible interviewee.

END OF INTERVIEW