

SRC 29

Interviewee: Will Campbell

Interviewer: Ben Houston

Date: July 1, 2003

H: It is July 1, 2003. I am in the cabin of Will Campbell near Mount Juliet, Tennessee. Reverend Campbell, I know you were born in Mississippi. What was the date?

C: July 18, 1924.

H: How would you describe 1950's Nashville to me, an outsider both to Nashville and the 1950s?

C: Nashville was deceiving itself. It thought that it was ahead, and it was, ahead of, say, Jackson, Mississippi, or Birmingham or Montgomery and so on, in terms of some leadership that did not want to be embarrassed by being haters and all that. But underneath that, you had some old aristocracy. The old Fugitive movement [a group of poets at Vanderbilt University], for example, was here. That was a racist movement. Actually, Donald Davidson [Vanderbilt professor of English; Fugitive poet, and Southern Agrarian], who was a fine writer, reporter, and others, I thought they had some good ideas when they talked about, you know, throw the radio out the window and take the banjo and the fiddle down off the wall. I thought that was cool. I still do. But, when it happened, why could not Donald Davidson, and I am using him as a prototype, why could they not have said to Uncle Dave Macon and the Grand Ole Opry early-timers, say, hey, man, it would be cool, we will go down to the Ryman Auditorium [site of Grand Ole Opry], and you pick your banjo and you sing me mountain songs, and then I will read poetry. And let there be this fusion of the culture and the university. Instead of that, they moved to Belle Meade [wealthy and exclusive suburb of Nashville] and didn't read anything but one another's [work], what they had written, and were embarrassed by the mountain, the rural people, the country music, which they finally, though not purposefully, but finally there is no more country music. It is a different genre than [that of] Uncle Dave Macon and Uncle what was his name. They were all uncles. They wouldn't recognize what is going on today.

Nashville was a country town, but it was more sophisticated than, say, Jackson, Mississippi, or even Memphis. Insurance ran it, and insurance took over the music industry, you know. The Grand Ole Opry was owned by National Life, a national insurance company, and that was on all the introductions and everything to the radio programs and so on. That, too, was not accurate. Country music did not really start in Nashville. It started up around Norris, Tennessee, above Knoxville. That is where Roy Acuff and a lot of the old-timers came from. They weren't Nashville people. But the insurance companies saw, and they built the National Life and Accident empire on country music. It sounds like a rather

extreme statement. That was not the only thing, but they had these, what did they call it, not commercial policies, but people would go door to door and insure people, and by the week they would go and collect. It was a terrible exploitation of the poor, is what it was, but they built one hell of an empire on it, and now they have got one hell of a political empire that is still governed by the same element.

H: You have acknowledged that there is a distinction between a place like Nashville and Mississippi, and you would credit that with the leadership in the first place and, number two, a certain self-image in Nashville?

C: Partly self-image, plus it wasn't as rural. Of course, I grew up in it, so what I say has to be kind of sifted through that sieve of small-farm yeomen culture. We were not on plantations. We did not work with other people, blacks and others. We did the work ourselves. What I grew up in and then what I found when I moved Nashville, although by then I then had other experiences in college. By the time I moved to Nashville, I had spent three years in New Haven at Yale University. How sophisticated do you want to get? So, it was definitely a different culture from what I had grown up in.

H: Talk a little bit about how you came to be involved with the Tennessee Council on Human Relations.

C: Well, that was not my major organization. I was involved in it. But I came here in 1955. I was for all practical purposes kicked out of the University of Mississippi where I was director of religious life, and that is another story that has nothing to do with Nashville, really, except I wound up here. With the National Council of Churches, it was new ingredient in Nashville culture. They had never had any staff-people here. It was very suspect even by [the standards of] some of the more enlightened churches. But being left-wing, if they'd only known how powerless it was, you know, they wouldn't have fooled with it. But we were small in number, the "liberal organizations."

That is how I first got to know George Barrett [Nashville attorney]. He was a law student living most of the time with his grandma. He's a Nashvillian. His daddy worked at the Jarman Shoe Company, or when they could get a job, although there was a vicious anti-Irish feeling here. He went to Father Ryan High School. When they would play other schools, they [people at the other high schools] would throw fish out on the court and all kind of stuff. So, he grew up with some real prejudice directed at him. But he was a young fellow, and then he went off to England for a year and came back and then was a young lawyer here. He was interested in "liberal causes," and was a labor lawyer primarily then. Of course, he has done a lot of things. George made a lot of money. I have a son who is a lawyer, and he is making a lot, too. I never made any, but that is okay. I have made all I needed. I have got sixty acres of woods here, my old cabin and a good

wife. What else is there?

But the Tennessee Council on Human Relations was, I think, not even in existence at that time. I don't recall when it was founded. But the Southern Regional Council got hold of some money, I am not sure if it was Ford [Foundation] money, but a whole passel of money to start councils in each state in the South. I was active in the little movement here. I knew about this guy in Dallas, Texas, a Methodist preacher named Baxton Bryant. I called him Booger Red because [of his] big red hair. He was a wild man. He had run for Congress against a very conservative Dallas congressman back in the 1950s. He ran against him twice and came within ninety-seven votes of beating him one time on a pro-labor, pro-civil rights ticket, but he didn't. So I had him come over here, and he was interviewed, and he kind of took it.

But before that, there was a group, and something that is so often neglected, that, primarily women, who, during the sit-ins in 1960 and earlier, they were standing around watching. They would go to court. It was almost like South Africa. And sit in the courtroom and observe what was going on and observe the violence. I will never forget, in February of 1960, quite early in 1960, when the first sit-in here was taking place. This is wandering around from your question, but it all gets back to it eventually, maybe.

There was an awful lot of violence. The degree of violence in Nashville has never really been told. Dave [Halberstam] wrote a wonderful book [*The Children*, about the Nashville sit-ins in 1960]. He is a good writer. Well, he is a journalist, not a writer. He is a reporter, and a good one. He was sitting here one day and working on his book with his yellow pad. He did not use one of these things [referring to interviewer's tape recorder]. He said, now, back up a little bit, on February 2... I said, Dave, I don't know how you do what you do, sitting there with a yellow pad and a pencil. He said, well, I am damn good at what I do. I said, I have never heard one question that. Anyway, my job was to be an observer. I wasn't one of the participants who had been trained by Rev. James M. Lawson. You will no doubt run into that name many times, and I hope, certainly, that you can interview him at some point.

H: Me, too.

C: Because he was a driving force in the Nashville student movement, which involved the adults later on and got them as involved as they were. Of course, Dave was there. Halberstam was a new kid on the block. A fellow named Smith, who went on to be very well-known at AP [Associated Press]. I think he wrote a book about Russia. He was here. A lot of people who became well-known journalists and who later fanned out all over the country. The procedure that First Baptist Church, Kelly Miller Smith, where he was pastor. First Baptist Capitol Hill

was a black church. I was a member, but I think I was the only white member. That is where the kids were meeting, and they would come out in groups of forty, thirty or whatever the number was, up to the Woolworth's store and Kreske's and one other store. As the word got around, it was a snowy Saturday morning and on in the afternoon, and as soon as they would be seated and turned away, they were arrested, taken to jail, and they were filling the jails, did fill the jails.

Upstairs, there was a smaller lunch counter, but there was more violence up there. As I recall, they were all male students sitting in up there. Downstairs, they were male and female. But this mob would come in, and they would spit on the kids and pull their hair and try to jerk them off [the stools]. There was this elderly woman, and I did not know who she was. She would go up and down the line. She would see somebody spit on a girl or jerk her hair, and she would single them out and say something like, now, you look like a nice young man. I bet you have a sweet little sister at home. How would you feel if that was your sister? And the guy, generally, they didn't know what they were doing, either.

It was a mob scene. They weren't organized. And he would lose face, and he would drop out. Then somebody else would take over, and she would [comment again]. I am convinced that she single-handedly kept [the peace], because at one point, the police pulled out and just left the kids at the mercy of the mob. Part of my job was, because I was white, I had some contacts at city hall and I could, by subterfuge, generally, find out when the strategy would change. One hour, it would be arrest them all as soon as they are seated, arrest them and put them in the paddy wagon. Well, that didn't work. That did not scare them because they kept coming, kept coming, kept coming. Finally, the word was, pull all the police out and lock the doors, and that is what happened while this old woman was pretty much singlehandedly keeping the peace.

Upstairs, I watched this one guy built like [the boxer] Mike Tyson, a black guy, and I said, that guy is about to lose his cool. A fellow came in, a white guy with a big old pointed cap and a feather, and they called him Old Green Hat, like Robin Hood, you know. He was a leader, and he took over, and he was trying to jerk this guy off the counter seat and finally did jerk him off [the seat]. And I heard a [swish], like a switch-blade knife. I never saw the knife, I never knew who had it, but out of the crowd came this white guy, preppie-looking fellow, we would call him today, and he grabbed this guy and said, you son of a bitch, if you touch him again, I'll stomp the piss out of you. He caught in the jaw and knocked him, and Old Green Hat said, hey, here come the cops. Well, there were no cops, but Old Green Hat had lost face.

All of this to say that people like this woman down there who was just watching, and it turned out she worked for the Methodist Sunday School Board. [She] told me, I did not know what was going on; I came down here to buy an egg poacher,

and said, I am not going to stand there and see these poor little girls treated like that, so I just did what [I could do]. She didn't see it as a heroic [thing to do]. But they would go to court and sit and testify about what they had observed and so on.

H: Were they part of the United Church Women or the Tennessee Council?

C: There were United Church Women. If there was an organization that they could claim, most of them would have been involved somehow in United Church women. But a lot of it was the Tennessee Council on Human Relations. Kay Jones [former TCHR member]. I am not sure if Kay is still living, but if she is, you really need to talk to her.

H: Yes. George Barrett said to ask you about her and B. J. Stiles [former TCHR member], actually.

S: B. J. would be a good one. B. J. lives, I think, in California now. He was editor of *Motive Magazine* and was very active in the Tennessee Council.

H: Mr. Barrett said that he had a vague idea that Kay Jones had moved to Kentucky. Does that ring any bell?

S: I think that is where she came from originally, but she ran the Tennessee Council on Human Relations. When it was first organized, she was the first director. Well, Louise Young might have been the first director. I know Louise is dead, and Kay, if she is not dead, she is quite old. But she is from Kentucky originally, and she must have some papers somewhere.

H: Since you brought up Baxton Bryant, could you talk a little bit more about him? I know as it got later into the 1960s, he ended up being a very controversial figure.

S: It depends on who you talk to as to how controversial he was. He was a wild man and wasn't scared of the devil. He and George had their differences, and George and I know that. We have talked about it, and I have kidded George about it. I said, you were scared of Baxton. [George would reply,] I wasn't scared of that son of a bitch. He was crazy. Well, he wasn't crazy, but he did like to be on the cutting-edge. He wanted to be put in jail and was. I don't think he was ever put in jail here, but down in Fayette County in Tennessee, in that movement there, he went to jail there. Yes, he was an important player. By the time he came along, the Tennessee Council had moved from this more sedate and politically sophisticated [movement and] more into a revolutionary-type movement. It had more young people in it. That was down Baxton's alley. That is what he wanted to lead, and did lead. He had a sizable following. Now, it was about that time that money began to run out and all the state councils actually died. But there was a

period there, I don't know, ten or twelve years, where in all the states.... This guy who just called me as you were coming in was the head of the Mississippi Council on Human Relations. He is now in Rochester, New York.

But the Tennessee Council on Human Relations would have been rated in terms of effectiveness or in terms of action between the militancy of the young people's movement, the student movement, or SNCC as it was called after 1960, when it was organized in Raleigh, North Carolina. And Nashville was probably the most important representation at that meeting [at Shaw University] in Raleigh, there and Virginia Union, I believe was the name of that college. There was real competition about who was going to run this new student organization, and finally Nashville prevailed.

H: Some people I have talked to have sort of insinuated, and it sort of sounded like you made overtones of this, that in the late 1950s, maybe the Tennessee Council was more of a social group in the sense of an interracial social group, but it was very sort of tea parties and conversation and that sort of thing. Would you agree with that assessment?

C: Well, I think the word tea party is too strong, but it was not the militancy of SNCC, for example. These were people like Louise Young, who taught at Scarritt College, a Methodist school here, and Kay Jones, who was a social worker. Then you had people at Fisk, people like Vivian Henderson, who taught political science, very urbane, very sophisticated. He was appalled when SNCC came along, you know. It wasn't that he disapproved of it. It was just, man, I didn't think my people had that kind of guts. I have been thinking about doing this, you know, being militant like this, all of my life. So, that is what the Tennessee Council was. It went back, actually, to something that I had worked [with] for a time. I left the National Council of Churches for something called the Committee for Southern Churchmen, which was an offshoot of the old Fellowship of Southern Churches, which you will no doubt run into. There [was] a fairly strong chapter here in Nashville.

A fellow named Howard Kester, a name you will certainly be running into or should. An old-line socialist, not a communist, and ran against Cordell Hull [Tennessee congressman] once for congress and made a sizeable race for congress against Cordell Hull. There was a pretty powerful socialist movement here, and they were interracial and tried to be, but it had not flourished and blossomed the way it did after May 17, 1954, [date of *Brown v. Board* school desegregation case] when the word got around among blacks [that] we don't have to live like this, we don't have to take this anymore. Of course, they continued to take it because they had to, and there is still a lot of taking going on.

H: That sort of brings up an important question. How would you characterize the

race relations within these interracial groups like the Committee of Southern Churchmen and the Tennessee Council? How did those dynamics work? Were there vestiges of southern paternalism, even among liberals and moderates?

C: Oh, sure. There was that, and there was a kind of timidity. Again, though, I don't know the history of it in Nashville, but you had these women groups around, almost like the black sashes. Who has written about that the most? A woman who teaches at Duke now. She went to Rhodes College, incidentally, before your time.

H: She is at UNC, actually. Jacqueline Dowd Hall [historian of the South, who wrote a book on Jessie Daniel Ames and the American Society of Women for the Prevention of Lynching titled *Revolt Against Chivalry*].

C: Yes. She wrote about these women who were a powerful force. But their thing was stopping lynching. Trying to desegregate restaurants and that sort of thing was not within the purview of their imagination even, not that they would have rejected that. They wouldn't have, but the other vicious violence of lynching and so on, and saying, look, you are not protecting us. [Lynchers] would say, we are protecting white womanhood. [The ASWPL would respond,] well, we are quite capable of protecting ourselves. You don't need to string somebody up on a telephone pole because of us.

But that was a different era. It certainly was part of the long progression there that gradually developed. Race relations in the South and, I think, in America, have always operated like a sieve. A certain crisis, like the First World War, for example, and it would open up a little bit, and more blacks and other minorities would come through to the main culture, but then it would restrict again. The pressure would come along, and the whites [would say], to hell with the niggers. Not that it was just the war that would open the net, the mesh, but that more than anything else. Then the Second World War, even more so when black soldiers went ahead and did fight and did die and then came back, and it was the same old crap going on. Then it opened up a little bit more, and the majority culture, being the white culture, allowed it to open a little bit more but not enough. Just some.

H: So, even these people who are sort of justly celebrated for doing this interracial work, like in the Tennessee Council, they still were slowly evolving in their own racial attitudes to a certain extent.

C: Oh, sure. Yes, I think we all were. My personal feeling was, my conversion was almost instantaneous in the Second World War. I mean, I grew up in Mississippi, although my father was not a bigot and his father was not. I do not know why. My mother was very much so. But my grandfather, I remember once, he was a man

who could read and write, but that was about the extent of it. We would always meet down at his house, all the little grandchildren, on Sunday afternoon to play. We were taunting an old black man who recently had been released from prison for stealing [some] corn out of a white man's field and sent to the penitentiary for it. He was shuffling off down the road, not looking at anything around, and we were saying, hi, nigger, hi, nigger. Grandpa called us all around and said, now, you don't do that. There are no niggers in the world. Yeah, Grandpa, yon walking, he's a nigger. No, he is a colored man, which was the acceptable, proper designation. He was a man. I never forgot that. Now, I am not saying that was some kind of a Damascus Road experience for me, nor can I explain – there must have been twelve or fifteen of us there, all boys – why most of the rest of us stayed on and joined the White Citizens' Council [pro-segregation group formed and Mississippi that later expanded throughout the South] and, some of them, even more violent organizations than that. I mean, there was this period of about twelve or fifteen years – this is kind of wandering away from Nashville, but you asked about my evolvment – when I could not go home. I would have been killed.

There was a family reunion every year, a big family, and they met. My daddy, for about eight or ten years, he never mentioned, but I knew, that it met every year on the last Sunday of May. Up to that time, he would always say, well, I will see you the last Sunday in May. And, yes, I will be there. But there was a long period when that was not true. Then, one day we were talking, and my father said, well, I guess I will see you Sunday. Well, I don't know, Dad; what's the temperature down there? He said, now that's all over. He said, now, you might hear in people's private homes from Friday at 5:00 to 8:00 Monday morning, people saying "nigger," but come 8:00 Monday morning, it is Mr. Robbins, because everyone is working for one federal program or another where they can't get away with that kind of talk. You know, when you are young, which you are, you don't think you are ever going to die or be killed by a bunch of racists. You know, I was born to live forever. So, I did not take it that seriously. But one or two times, Daddy had my brother Joe, who kind of protected me. I don't know if you know about Joe.

H: I have read about him, yes, sir.

C: A great American. He would keep me informed on when it was safe, when it wasn't safe and so on. He called me a couple of times and said, don't go home this summer or this month or whatever.

There was one old boy I grew up with down there, and he was my best buddy. He was a little older and was a little bit below our class level. [He] dropped out of school about the seventh or eighth grade. We were pals. We would carve our initials in blood. You know, we were blood brothers and all. Just before he died –

he died of emphysema – I had stopped at the little single-wide trailer where he was living down there. I had been to see my parents. We called him Hog. I said, Hog, how close did I come? He said, Dave {Reverend Campbell's middle name}, we were wrong to think that a few of us down here could hold off the United States Army, the Supreme Court, the Congress, the National Guard, and we were going to say you can't do this. He said, now, I was with them when we were looking for you, but I wasn't going to let them kill you. Now, we were going to have an understanding, but I was armed, and then I was going to say, okay, boys, that is enough. Well, I said, now the only trouble with that, Hog, you take me down to Homichitti Bottoms and beat the hell out of me or whatever you do to exact this understanding, and then you say, turn him loose. I knew all of you. Most of you were kin to me, had gone to school with me. Even if you had masks on, I knew you. But you didn't know me. You didn't know what I did. You knew rumors. You didn't know if I was a communist or the head of the FBI in Mississippi. You didn't know what I did, who I represented. I said, they would have killed me after they had the understanding, [even if] they would have had to kill you. He said, well, Dave, they would have had to kill me. I don't know if that is southern, and I don't want to be sexist about it, whether it was the southern boys' loyalty or what it is, but there is something there that he would have said, no, if you come by me to get to him, you are going to fall dead. That fortunately did not happen because I did not go there. That was one of the times Joe called and said, Daddy said don't come home this weekend. I don't know how we got off [track]. I don't think that is the answer to your question.

H: That is something, though. That is quite a story. Let me ask this. How did the groups like the Tennessee Council coexist with the other groups, both predominantly white and the black civil rights groups in the 1950s and 1960s, like the Committee of Southern Churchmen, for example?

C: They were supportive. They were support groups. I was a part of the Tennessee Council on Human Relations, and I was also a member of the NAACP, but I wasn't active in the NAACP. Very few white people were. A few. Some people like Nelson [and] Marion Fuson, for example, who taught at Fisk University, would have been active in the NAACP. I simply joined just because I could. When I was in Mississippi, it would have been, well...

H: You would have been noticed, I am sure.

C: You wouldn't have survived at that time. When I was at Ole Miss, the state legislature passed a law, I guess, that everyone who was on the staff or faculty at Ole Miss had to sign a document of every organization they had ever belonged to. Well, of course, they were looking for NAACP [members]. Anybody would have been a fool. At that time, I wasn't a member of NAACP. I am not sure there was even a chapter in Oxford at that time, or it was very, very small among

blacks, let alone whites. At first, it was such a terrible violation of what I knew as my civil rights. It was none of their business. I put I belonged to the Baptist Church and the Masonic Lodge, I think, two of the safest outfits in the state. I then turned it in. Of course, I did not survive anyway.

H: Would you judge the Tennessee Council as an effective organization?

C: I would. At the time, they had inroads into the larger culture and to the press. You had two newspapers here. You had *The Tennessean* that was for the time liberal. It had one whale of a great staff. Then you had *The Banner* that was downright fascist. It later went out of business, not for that reason. Barrett was a little young to have this kind of influence, but he went to work for a fellow named Cecil Branstetter. Cecil had been an old labor lawyer. He was with Bob and all of them, and George. So, George had the input there, and they did have the input on the paper and in the city club. They could say to the power structure, look, you guys shape up; you are embarrassing us; for God's sake, cut this crap out. Now, that did not stop the violence when it came to the sit-ins and desegregating the restaurants and the theaters and so on, but it did set a sort of ethos that people like the mayor, when Diane Nash [Fisk University student who was a key leader in the Nashville student movement] led this group down there, if I have ever seen such a dramatic thing, when she stood there and looked him in the eyes and said, do you think it is right – there were 3,000 to 5,000 in line behind her – that we can go in that store and buy anything there, but we can't walk ten feet and get a cup of coffee? Do you think that is right? Do you think it is Christian? And he started talking about, well, my little lady... And she was not a little lady. She was a beautiful young woman, but she wasn't a frail little lady. [She said], never mind that, Mr. Mayor. Do you think it is Christian? And he finally said, no, I don't. When that happened, I knew it was over. I knew that the stores of Nashville would be desegregated.

Now, to touch, at least, on your question. This went all the way back. Now, you couldn't say Louise Young or Kay Jones or Cecil Branstetter ever were directly responsible for this little woman up there asking these questions, an eighteen- or nineteen-year-old kid, but the answer that the mayor finally was forced by her to give was influenced by these people.

H: It contributed to the climate.

C: Yes. He knew they were back there, and he personally wasn't a rabid racist. He was, you know, I am the mayor, and this what the people elected me to do, and we are going to have segregation here and we are going to have peace and order. So, it does go all the way back, just as the dynamiting of the Hattie Cotton [Elementary] School that night [in September 1957] would go back to, I don't want to refer verbally to the man you said you interviewed yesterday, but that

element of hate that it was.

H: A lot of people have said that, in their opinion, the cases of violence with the Hattie Cotton School and then later the bombing of [Z. Alexander] Looby's home drew the battle lines and sort of solidified [Nashville's resolution to comply so as to avoid violence]. Would you agree with that?

C: I think that was certainly part of it. I don't know that it was the act that solidified it, but more people were.... Mr. Looby, my God, he was a Republican. He wasn't a dangerous radical. He wasn't American, you know. He was from one of the [Caribbean] Islands. But Avon Williams, who was his partner, worked for him, was very much a Tennessee negro. But Mr. Looby was a widely respected man, and except for the color of his skin, which was the color of that case there, he would have been president of the Rotary Club or the City Club or whatever. But just because of that, he was in the background, but he was respected, and people, even a lot of the racists, would say, now, dynamiting in a man's home, you know, that's his castle. That did help some. And the dynamiting of Hattie Cotton School....

The problem was, in any social movement, there is a climate of fear, just as this God-awful war we've got going here [referring to the war with Iraq]. A lot of people know better but are not going to say anything because, well, my neighbors will think I'm not patriotic, so I will just keep my mouth shut. There was a lot of that. But when you start dynamiting schools, well, you are hitting the white folks' pocketbooks. Schools were built with tax funds. And we're not going to let some dumb son of a bitch like John Kasper [itinerant racial demagogue who encouraged violent acts to resist integration in Nashville] come down from the north. In fact, Kasper probably did more to desegregate Nashville than any one person, just by being such a jerk. I don't know whatever became of that fellow, if he went back north or if he died or what happened to him. Then there were a few white preachers who preached hate all the time.

H: Is that Fred Stroud [Kasper henchmen who formed his own radical offshoot of a Presbyterian church]?

C: Stroud, yes. ____ Perry now, the guy who took his place.

H: John McCurio, I think, was another one.

C: I don't remember him. I don't know.

[End of Side A1]

C: I was, I suppose, more of a liaison between, say, the Tennessee Council and SNCC. So, the Saturday that they were going down to decide, this is the day that we are going to sit-

in, then call Will Campbell, not to be down there leading, but as a liaison to let us know what is going on in City Hall and among the police. I could mill around and hear what the cops were saying. A few of the cops began to catch on. Just because somebody is a cop, doesn't mean he's stupid. [They would say] what do you do? And I would say, I am a writer, or some partial truth.

H: That is actually a perfect segue. Dave Halberstam has written that you had a shrewd sense of how the interior establishment politics of Nashville worked, based on this behind-the-scenes facilitating. Can you elaborate on that? You must have some sense of the powers-that-be.

C: We all operate, at least partially or should, within this circumscribed...within the bounds of some degree of modesty. But it didn't have so much to do with me personally or my own bravery or wit or anything else but it was the color of my skin and my commitment, certainly. [Reverend James] Jim Lawson, who is probably the singularly most influential activist in that period, which was no more than a decade, no more than five or six years, was kicked out or was asked to resign for the Divinity School. He had been arrested and charged with criminal anarchy because of his leadership in the sit-ins. The dean of the Divinity School went over to his home – and they were on friendly terms, and the dean was a rabid racist but he was representing “The Man” – and Jim gave in. He said, don't you think it would be best? Now, he said, you are going to be expelled, but wouldn't it be better for you to resign? And then put that in terms of the health of the Divinity School, which Lawson had some feeling about. He was a student there. His wife was a graduate [of Tennessee State]. [She] happened to have been my secretary. I introduced them. Then he married her and took her away. Well, she continued to work for me for a while. Jim wasn't an unreasonable person. He said, alright, I will do that.

So, together, they wrote a letter. I will never forget. It was snowing, and Jim called me early the next morning and said there was going to be this meeting at 10:00, and I am going to read this letter of resignation. I said, Jim, don't leave your apartment until I get there. Now, I have seen this movie; don't do that. They were there. He and Dorothy were there when I got over there, over in west Nashville. I said, now, Jim, I was in this position at the University of Mississippi, and I did exactly what they are asking you to do, and I was wrong. Now, they were going to kick me out, but I should have made them kick me out so it was a matter of record. Now, you are going to be expelled. You are never going to be able to attend Vanderbilt University, not now. Don't do this. And we tore the letter up. Dorothy, his wife, who was tough... I was very much opposed to the marriage because her father was not a rich, rich man, but fairly affluent for an African-American in east Tennessee. He owned a chain of small groceries up and down the state line there. She grew up pretty much with a silver spoon. I knew that Jim Lawson was going to be in trouble until the day he died, but I didn't think she would be strong enough to take it, but I was wrong. She was. She took it all the way through.

Now, the dean did not know what my role was, but he came out and he said, Will, this is doing nobody any good. He said, it is ruining the name of Vanderbilt Divinity School. The divinity school will never recover from it. Finally, I said, it is doing nobody good, except the soul of Jim Lawson, that he has maintained his integrity. I believed that then and believe it now. Of course, Dean Nelson later changed and was, in effect, fired himself. It was all some interesting days, convoluted and no one progression of events. I am glad I didn't miss it.

H: Where do you think that the power was in Nashville, based on your behind-the-scenes understanding? Where were the bases of power in Nashville in terms of running the city? You have insinuated, obviously, Vanderbilt was a factor. Insurance, as you said earlier.

C: A man who was the chairman of the board of trustees at Vanderbilt University was the publisher of the *Nashville Banner*.

H: [James G.] Stahlman.

C: Jimmy Stahlman. [He] was by far the most powerful man in Nashville. He had allies, certainly, in high places, but that's partly because those allies, were the ones who had stock in the *Nashville Banner* and he was beholden to them, the Nashville Life and Accident Insurance Company and so on. The governor at that time [Frank G. Clement], he was a good man who just wanted it to all go away. He did not want that to be happening, but he knew that he couldn't, although he did do more than, say, the governor in throwing all this trash away. The last week or so here, I keep running into Ross Barnett [former segregationist governor of Mississippi], who is just an evil man.

But [Buford] Ellington [Clement's successor] and [Frank G.] Clement, they weren't that way. They were not going to get out and lead the sit-in movement, and they recognized where the political power was but didn't always behave accordingly. Frank Clement came within one vote in the [Tennessee] senate of abolishing the death penalty in this state, and if he had pulled it off, I don't think we'd have a death penalty statute here today. He went before a joint session...

[Telephone rings, taped interrupted.]

H: You were talking about Frank Clement and the death penalty.

C: Yes. He spoke to a joint session of the legislature, and it went to a vote. He won it in the house and then lost it in the senate, by one vote, to abolish the death penalty. If they had, I don't think the legislature since ever would have reinstated it. Of course, now we have it and every time it comes up to execute somebody, we have to go through all of this. I was sorry yesterday morning to see where Senator [Bill] Frist [Senate Majority Leader] is wanting to have a constitutional amendment [to keep marriage as a heterosexual

institution]. He is just wrong. Never mind the morality of the issue. He is wrong to stir things up. A constitutional amendment is an awful lot of trouble. In fifty states, you are going to...I mean, my God.

H: You'd think he'd have better things to do, right?

C: Well, of course. I have been very disappointed in him, and I keep writing him letters. My doctor, who is one of the Frist doctors, keeps telling me I drink too much. I don't write those letters at toddy time, Doc. He said, well, you know, Billy's one of my dearest friends. I'm an ardent Democrat, and I don't believe in it, either. I said, why don't you tell him? You know, I tell my friends what I think. Tell him he's just full of shit, that he's going to stir the country all up about something that wouldn't affect but ten dozen people in our lifetime. Gays who want it to be legal [to marry their partners]. Well, who doesn't want it to be legal? We want everything to be. They made lynching legal, for God's sake.

H: You have commented elsewhere that politics in Nashville were fairly modern for their time in the 1950s, and yet the social and cultural mentality was much more conservative. Can you elaborate on that dynamic?

C: What was it, ten or twelve, the Fugitives?

H: Twelve, the Agrarians.

C: Yes, who were intellectuals, and they were widely respected. People [would say], and he is a great poet, he is a great man, a great writer. And they couldn't go on to say, but he was a bigot. He didn't like black people, and he didn't like poor people. That's another thing that troubles me in the people I was talking about a while ago at the beer joint, that they don't realize that the very people who were recruiting them in the White Citizens' Council wouldn't wipe their feet on them other than to use them for their cause. That's too bad. I forgot what your question was, but that is the answer.

H: There you go. So, there was sort of a distinct reactionary element in Nashville for all of its reputation of moderation.

C: Oh, definitely, yes. Sure.

H: This is something that sort of interests me, and I am not sure historians always quite grasp. Is there such a thing as a thinking segregationist?

C: Yes, I think so. What was I reading just the other day? It was speech that Lincoln was alleged to have made on the steps of the Capitol, where he was speaking to a black audience right after the [Civil] War ended. He said, we have freed you now, but we do not belong together, or something like that.

H: I know that in some of your writings, you have talked about moderation and the fact that, especially as the movement went on, there was perhaps an unfair characterization of moderates in the civil rights movement. Do you still feel that way?

C: One shouldn't promote their own wares, but have you seen my book *Forty Acres and a Goat*?

H: Yes, sir.

C: I believe it is back in print now.

H: I have drawn some questions from these sorts of issues.

C: I guess I talk more in Nashville. Unfortunately, the first edition of that book had the truth in it, and then they dropped it out for some reason, the fact that who was my main character there appears in more than one body makes it nonetheless real. All those things happened, but they didn't happen to the same person. The reason I did it that way was just to keep it in manageable proportions.

H: You mean the character of T.J.?

C: T.J. The fact that T.J. appears in more than one body makes it nonetheless real. More than one body doesn't make it any less real.

H: So, how do you look at moderates, especially white moderate southerners now that the movement has gone on over time?

C: I don't really know what the term moderate means in terms of race. You either believe that all people are equal or you don't. If you don't, then you are a racist. You are an extremist. If you say, well, I believe that we are equal in some ways and some ways we are not, I don't think that makes you a moderate. It makes you a racist. Now, I think I know how people used the word back during the movement. Anybody who said moderate meant, well, let's don't try to do it overnight. Generally, in my observation, people who said, Rome wasn't built in a day, they just meant Rome couldn't be built. If you are not going to do it right away, then you weren't going to do it. If you say, well, we will do it next year, well, you are an extremist to the people who say never, and there were a lot of people who said never, and still some. I could not believe... I do not know if you were in town the other day. I guess it was a week ago Sunday. Two long articles about these groups who want to secede, you know, the Southern League...

H: I did see that.

C: I don't understand it. That wasn't fit copy. I mean, that ranks right up there with Frank Sutherland's wine in Nashville. I get pissed every Monday morning when I open that paper and here is the executive editor of one of the state's leading newspapers and that is his contribution. Not talking about George Bush, not talking about Iraq, but wine in Nashville. Well, I don't give a shit how much wine anybody drinks or what kind. I don't get it.

H: Pretty strange, huh?

C: Well, it is childish, except that I understand that the thing is syndicated and it is in a lot of papers. So, if you are in Toledo, well, the heading is "Wine in Toledo". So, here's a guy, well, then just quit being the editor of the *Nashville Tennessean* and let somebody else. They've got some pretty good journalists down there. Let them be the editor, and you do your column like what's her name, Miss Chef or whatever, who really is a nice lady. It turned out I know her, I didn't realize when she started that thing. I still can't bring into focus what the purpose of all this copy was. Now, if there were a thousand people rushing out joining those, then that's news and it ought to be in the newspaper, but that's not a big monumental social movement right now. A few nuts.

A kid got mad at me. I wrote a book about Bishop Duncan Gray, and a lot of it is about the University Grays, [who] marched off the campus, and none of them ever came back. Well, this guy, who considers himself an authority on the University Grays, got so mad at me. He cussed me out on the phone, though he said he wasn't being uncivil because he didn't cuss. I said, well, man, you are saying some words that sound awful like cussing to me. He called me a liar. That's cussing. In an earlier day, if you want to talk about the old south, that's dueling ground talk.

H: Defiling your honor.

C: Yes. He said to another friend of mine, Governor Winter, a different stripe from most southern governors during those days, although he did say at one point, I am a segregationist, but he didn't traffic in it. But he said he heard this guy say on numerous occasions that, I just am embarrassed every time I hear somebody say I live in the United States of America. I said, well, what does he want them to say? He said, I live in the Confederate States of America. I mean, that is lunacy.

H: Old habits die hard.

C: Oh, well, that is just nonsense.

H: In terms of Nashville, I was wondering if I could ask you your insights on the African-American perspective of African-American Nashvilleans. Talk about the generational split that was exhibited by the sit-ins. Did you see a split between the older generation

and this newer generation of students?

C: Well, not as much as I anticipated and not as much as I would have thought would have been there. On Monday morning after the Saturday when all the sit-ins took place and all these kids were put in jail, and they were all bailed out by Monday night or Tuesday or whatever, I was down at the Citizens' Bank, where I have banked ever since we moved here in 1955. I was down there to borrow some money, and [to] the person at the bank, the cashier, I said, who are all these people in the vaults? He said, they are bank examiners, federal and state. He said, I have been a banker for forty-three years or whatever, and I have never had a bank examiner walk in my bank without first telling me they are coming, make an appointment, and I have never had state and federal. He said, I know what they are looking for, but they are not going to find it. They think that the money that was raised over the weekend to bail these kids out of jail came out of my bank, but it didn't. He said, now, you know, they'll find some overdrawn [accounts] and things like that which you find at any bank in town. They have the right to be back there, so they'll stay all day if they want to.

H: So, you think there was actually a high amount of unity between....

C: There's no question about it. I know when this *Eyes On the Prize* [civil rights television documentary] [came out], Mrs. Walker, Matthew Walker's mother, a funny lady. Her husband is a doctor and very urbane and wealthy, and the kid went to the finest summer camps and all that. He called and said, mother, I am in jail. She got tickled. He said, be cool, mother, be cool. She would cry. She would weep, and then she would laugh. Of course, we went down and bailed him out. There was a concerted effort.

Now, there was a lot leading up to that. There were people down at First Baptist Capitol Hill who objected to the church building being used for training because, you know, some of the kids, they would smoke and put out cigarettes on the pews and all that kind of stuff and leave a pretty big mess like young people do, or old ones even. I think the most telling support for that position I am taking here is that Easter boycott. That dried that town up. That brought them to Jesus, I am telling you. Then the mass meetings on the churches would be packed night after night. You could go to any of the big name churches, and there, there would be preaching and singing, and there was support of the kids. A few people would say, well, the kids are going too fast, and they're just going to get us all in trouble. I was appalled at the support that there was. It was amazing. I was very pleased because most all of them could have said to a seventeen- or eighteen-year-old college freshman, you cut that out. We don't do that.

H: Did you ever get the sense that there were some African-Americans in Nashville who maybe were leery of supporting the movement because they had done pretty well for themselves in a segregated society?

- C: Oh, sure, no question about that. There were both directions, some because they had done well for themselves and some who hadn't done well, but who didn't want to displease the man. There was an element of Uncle Tomism around, as there always is, still is. But the majority... Certainly, I couldn't speak for the black masses. My contact was in the Movement itself but also in church, and I never heard any... Of course, Kelly Miller Smith was the pastor there, and anybody would have been a fool to have said anything against the children, which he called them. We have got to support the children.
- H: You have talked in an earlier oral history that you did that – I am talking about the wider civil rights movement now; not just necessarily in Nashville – that there was almost perhaps an element that the image of African-Americans was raised to an unrealistic level as these sort of paragons of virtue. Do you recall those? I think the quotation you said was, “They were all supposed to look like Lena Horne and be as smart as Ralph Bunche.” Can you elaborate on that? I thought that was a really interesting point.
- C: Oh, I don't know. It is just an unrealistic expectation that we didn't allow black people to be fully human. They had to either rise above us or they were all black trash, and the truth is not many people are as smart as Ralph Bunch, black or white, or as pretty as Lena Horn. That was, I think, a rationalization, just saying, well, they don't act like they are supposed to act. There was an expectation there that was, in a sense, did not mean to be racist, but it was. They are supposed to be better than white people, not the same as or even worse.
- H: Let me stop asking questions for a while and just throw the floor open to you. Is there anything that you feel through your long dabbling in Nashville race relations that hasn't gone explored by historians? You mentioned earlier the element of violence during the sit-ins, but is there anything I should be asking about that I haven't asked about, any details that you wish were recorded by historians that you feel have gone under-examined?
- C: Well, maybe there has been, but I never seen a detailed account of black political activities. See, blacks could vote in Nashville and did vote, but I don't recall... I remember one time, Clifford Allen was running for governor, and George was his big man. I was supposed to be in charge of blacks, you know, [laughs] and I want you to get a dozen or so blacks, and we're going to meet somewhere over in east Nashville, and we did. Clifford Allen came and spoke, and then he left, and so did George. He was trying to organize the black community. He said, now, we've got to see this as a mandate, and so next Thursday night, we're all going to meet, and such and such and so. The black person who was kind of the Ward Healer said, “now, I hope you understand what this man is saying, that next Thursday night, you fill up your car with mandates and all show up.” Of course, George knew better than to laugh out loud, but he said, “what are we getting into? How do you put a mandate in an automobile?” I don't know. It's your meeting, George.

H: Was that pretty common in the politics at the time in Nashville?

C: It was fairly common that somebody was going to go after the “black vote” because it was enough to go after. It wasn’t a block, but it was close to being a block. Of course, there weren’t as many black voting then as there are now, but there no – I don’t recall any – overt effort to stop them like in Nashville, like in my county [Amite County, Mississippi], a man shot dead in front of a cotton gin by a state legislator because he had gone down to register to vote. I don’t know if you have seen I have a new little book out about the first black who was elected to state office in Mississippi, Robert George Clark. I called it *A Journey to the House*. His grandfather had been a slave, and his grandfather lived to be almost 100. Had practically raised this man, so he knew all the stories and went through all of the periods of deprivation in his county. Before the 1960s, there wasn’t a single black registered to vote in his county. After the movement got there, SNCC and then COFO and so on, he decided he was going to run for the state legislature, and he did and won. The man he beat was a man whom I’d had some dealings with when I was at Ole Miss. He kind of led the pack. He was in the state legislature to get rid of [Campbell] off the Ole Miss campus because he was a communist. [He thought] that man, the white man, J. P. Love was his name, he just was not going to have it that a black man had unseated him, so he took him to court every test imaginable. Marian Wright, who is now Marian Wright Edleman, was a young lawyer in Mississippi who had come down as part of the movement, a single woman just out of law school, she was his lawyer. As late as when they were going to swear him in, he wasn’t sure that he was going to be sworn in. They told him, you come in the front door of the capitol. He said, I had never been in the capitol. I didn’t know what the front was. But they found out. Then somebody stopped them at a certain point, the press, and they realized they were standing beside the statue of [Theodore] Bilbo [former racist demagogic governor of Mississippi]. Well, that was one historic photograph. Even then, J. P. Love was challenging. He said, Mr. Speaker, the rule of the House is that anybody registered to vote has to be able to read and write, and I know that certain people don’t. So, they asked him to name one, and he named this person. My man, Robert Clark, said, sir, I know he can read and write. The Speaker said, how do you know? He said, because I taught him. He had organized a night class for elderly people, and he told the story, which probably did as much as anything to turn the thing around. He told the story there in the legislature that this old man who was being challenged could read and write. He said he came in one night late to a meeting because he had stopped to help a woman who had a flat tire change the flat on her car, and he was late. He had a crumpled piece of paper in his pocket, and he opened it up and read it and said, this is a letter from my daughter in Chicago, and this is the first time I have ever been able to read a letter from my baby. So, he stayed on, and he later became Speaker Pro Tempore of the House of Representatives.

H: Did he?

C: Yes, sir. He had a very, very successful career there.

H: What is the title of the book?

C: The title of it is *Robert George Clark's Journey to the House*. I don't like that title, but it the University of the Mississippi Press, and they have to have these academic titles, you know, to sell the academicians. But it is his story, and I think it is a good story. How well I have written it is a different matter. But he has made a difference. Now, some of the SNCC folks and so on, the real militants, felt that he wasn't in your face enough when he was elected, but he knew what he was doing. They had, during the 1950s and 1960s, passed a law repealing the compulsory school law, and he knew the reason for that. He got on the education committee. Then the chairman of the education committee was running for something else, and he was a pretty notorious racist. He came to Robert Clark and said, Mr. Clark, I lack one vote for Speaker of the House in the legislature. If I had one more vote on my petition... And Clark, who wanted to be on the education committee, knew this would be a way he could get that appointment. He said, hand me your pencil. Newman – the guy's name was Newman – got on his knee and said, I never would have thought that a peckerwood would get on his knees to a nigger and beg him for his vote in the House of Representatives, but I thank you, sir. And that put him over, and he was Speaker. He then put Clark on the education committee and pretty soon, the chairman got a job in Washington or something and just moved Clark up to be chairman.

H: When historians write about the movement, we talk about the integration of schools, voting rights, all those sorts of things. What is your sense of how race relations have changed on a day-to-day level among individuals through the 1960s and 1970s and on to now?

C: In the sense of personal relationships, for example, we have a friend who is the only black in the subdivision up here close to Lakeside School, and he can't read and write. I did not know it for a long time, but we became good buddies and went places together. We would go to eat together and all kind of stuff that we wouldn't have done, even with my changed feeling after I came back from the war. We would have gone different ways when it came lunchtime if we were working on a project together. Now, the families socialize, and nobody thinks anything about it. But there are still white churches and black churches. There are a few blacks in a few white churches and a few whites in a few black churches, but we just waited too late for that. My daddy was custodian of the records of his Baptist church in Mississippi, which was organized in 1808, I believe, when Mississippi was still a territory. Blacks were members of that church. They were listed. T. J. Spurlock and then Alec McCrea. FMC after the war, a free man of color, or FWC, a free woman. Before that, a slave belonging to... But they didn't have the slave balconies there which you read about because that little old church house was about four times as big as this room. It was just one room, and they all sat together. They were baptized in the same little river down there, same creek. Now, after the war, that began to change. My daddy had these records, and I went through them. One of the rules at the

church was that if you missed three successive Sundays, you had to go before the church and explain and ask for pardon for being absent, except women in childbirth or if somebody was seriously ill. I noticed more and more and more, each conference, they would call them, the business meeting, fewer FWCs and FMCs. What was happening, these people were going up to Brown's Chapel, a little black church. Now, I understand why they wanted to have their own church. I understand that because they still were not in positions of leadership, for the most part, in the white churches. I have no right to say I expected them to do this, but if they could have held on, then it would not have been too many years before some practical, stingy old planner who hated paying high taxes would have said, wait a minute, our kids go to school together, they swim together, they get baptized together, they go to vacation Bible school together, why we got colored schools and white schools? We can't afford one school system. I think that would have done a lot to break down the pattern of segregation that persisted. But it didn't happen, and I understand, and I don't expect black people to be exempt from Original Sin anymore than whites.

H: Well, I have taken up a lot of your time. Are there any other memories or anecdotes you would like to share, anything I need to know about Nashville in understanding Nashville and examining Nashville and its race relations?

C: Nothing comes immediately to mind. As I said earlier, I am glad I didn't miss it, although I did miss a lot of it. 1957, of course, was the big school year here. That was the year of Little Rock. I spent about half my time in Little Rock and about half my time here and really was more involved with the Little Rock kids. I walked to the school with the kids, but they were high school kids.

H: Of course, then you made up for it during the sit-ins in Nashville, I think.

C: I hope so. But even if I had been here, these were first graders. Even people like Kelly Miller Smith, who was a pastor and good friend, would say, no, Will, I've got to take the little children by the hand, take them through that mob. That is not your [place]. You can go with me if you want to....

[End of Interview.]