

University of North Carolina at Asheville
D. Hiden Ramsey Library Special
Collections/University Archives

**Oral History Register
For**

O.L. Sherrill

Title O.L. Sherrill Oral History

Creator O.L. Sherrill

Alt. Creator Deborah Miles

Date March 16, 2005

Subject The Integration of the Asheville City Schools

Subject Stephens Lee; Asheville High; Integration; Segregation; South French Broad; Lee Edwards; Riots; Curriculum; Curfew

DM: I'd like you to begin talking about 1963 and your history. What was your role then'

OS: I was a Language Arts and Social Studies teacher at Hill Street. Hill Street was basically considered a Junior High School under Ms. Rita Lee. I spent one year teaching at Hill Street and then, of course, transferred to Stephens Lee. I taught Physical Education and History during the time I was there as well as coaching some girls' basketball. In 1965, we moved into the new South French Broad High School because they were closing down Stephens Lee and taught Language Arts, Social Studies, Health and P.E. at South French Broad for two years and that was the beginning of my administration. I became Assistant Principal. During that time, I served two or two and half years and then, of course at that time Lee Edwards and South French Broad merged into one school. You mentioned the fact that what was done prior to the student bodies, particularly the student government, had worked diligently to bring about what they anticipated to be some of the problem. They tried to solve it before they happened. You must remember that never hi the history of Ashville had blacks and whites come together, so there were many things that weren't known, fear factors, the desire not to move. Even though they changed the name of the school, that was the number 1 thing, from Lee Edwards to Asheville High, of course it had been Asheville High School before. The mascots were changed. Team colors, school colors were changed. The basic social parts of both schools were changed to a point that they decided once they decided to set up the school that they have co-presidents for student bodies. The first several years we had a

co-president for the student government. We'd Co-preside as far as Co-presiding could go to make sure that each and both groups were receiving as much equal treatment as possible. However, no one really sat down with the students and said, do you want to go, because there were no choices. This is the rebellion that came about and developed into riots. The students at South French Broad, after almost a brand new school because we were only about three or four years old, went to someone else's house as they considered it, which was a long distinguished, cold, stone building and they resented that. When that resentment came out, it came out in rebellion. There were several things that we had heard and knew about that were happening in the community. For example, there were community groups that were meeting and protests, there were those students who did not want to be there for whatever reason they of course were meeting. And of course, all of this spilled back into the school. Whatever happened in the community spilled back into the school. On a Monday morning, we got word that we were going to have a walkout. The walkout was that the black people were going to leave the classroom at a certain time and gather in front of the building. I would say around mid-morning, 10:00 or 10:30, that happened. Even though teachers asked them not to leave, this was a protest. You don't deal with protests in trying to appease people. So, when it happened, they went out to the front steps. They were asked to go back in. Unfortunately, the vocation building, which is directly across from Little Pigs, had just been completed and there were a lot of construction material lying around, such as stones or whatever they could get their hands on. Their frustration was taken out on that building. In other words, you must have a target and whatever that target is, that is what you are going to attack. They attacked the building by throwing stones and breaking windows. We finally had to call the police art they came and there were scuffles and no one was seriously hurt. There were a couple o heads that were banged up and little scuffles. The superintendent decided to close the school for the day. Through deliberation, we went into what was called an injunction. The school was placed under an injunction, which was a stature that North Carolina had that would forbid anyone from coming or going that was an outsider, restricted all school activities, no extracurricular activities. Of course, school was closed down and students were not to report back to school. I think the first time we stayed on injunction for about seven or eight days I just recall. Teachers reported to work with a very eerie feeling because none of us had experienced anything like this. We had no idea what the consequences would be or how we were going to get the school back. We knew we had to come back to school sooner or later. Teachers were empowered to do arrests under the injunction if they so desired if there was someone on campus that shouldn't be there. But, one of the highlights was that they kept some of the school's extracurricular activities, particularly the football team, intact. They could practice off campus. We had games during that period of time. Of course, equipment had to be taken to Memorial Campus for them to dress. No one could be on campus. Gradually, we came back after the injunction was lifted. At the same time with policemen in the hallways on campus and everything was very safe. I tell people it was an exciting time to live. What I mean by that is, there are certain things in life that you experience and you grow as a result of it. I always believe that the strong shall survive and that happened.

DM: I think I remember that the students who organized the walkout had a very specific list of demands that had to do with trophies. How did those students organize themselves?

OS: Here again, the students wanted to take certain things with them that they had to leave at South French Broad or that were left at South French Broad. Stephens Lee had great pride in their academics, extracurricular activities and fantastic teams over the years and all of a sudden they left trophies, plaques and all of the special recognition behind. No one had addressed this as a desire in the beginning. Something was taken for granted that was a mistake. That was one thing that they wanted. There were other things. We had a basic, fairly restricted dress code. Nothing compared to what we have today. We have to remember we're talking about the 1960's when people wore ties and all this kind of thing. One had to wear socks. If you wore shoes, you had to have socks on. That became an issue. Not to the same point that it caused a riot, but certainly undesirable. No one in the past said that you must look and act a certain way. The Vietnam War was taking place about that time and as a result, the whole world, particularly America, was rebelling against something. So, the big issue was leaving the trophies, the plaques and those kinds of recognitions behind. They were eventually brought to the school and now for visit. They made room for them. They didn't have room at first, but after the riot, room was developed.

DM: Were there other things, like the Alma Mater, music and things like that, had that been changed before the students came?

OS: Well, actually, at Stephens Lee there was an alma mater, but when we went to Asheville High, there was never an alma mater developed; it was the fight song. I don't know to this day whether there is an alma mater or not. You can just about ask anyone who attended Stephens Lee and they can sing their alma mater. That was a lot of pride. I'm quite sure that mother would know if there is an alma mater or not, because I don't think we ever developed one. For those first early years, we were so busy being bitter and school spirit and things like that were almost null and void for a while.

DM: How was the decision made that African American students went to Asheville High?

OS: Well that was pretty much the way it was over the South. What I mean by that is, the school was there, you go throughout much of the South and you find very few schools that were predominantly black where white students enrolled. We had David Millard, which was a junior high and Hall Fletcher, which was a junior high. Prior to integration, merging of Asheville High and South French Broad, some of our earlier students went directly from black elementary schools to David Millard. They never went to South French Broad. So there was a small group that never went to the high school. When they decided to integrate, they said that this is a school where everyone will go and there was no choice. The choice would have been, since South French Broad is a new school, why not bring everyone to South French Broad. It would not have been large enough. So, that was pretty much the way it was during the time that black students were transferring

to white schools and that brought about resentment. You mentioned something about parental involvement and parental concerns. Unless it was done throughout the PTA's, I don't remember any particular groups strongly resenting it or speaking out against it. Everybody was concerned that their children would be safe and no harm would come to them. That was pretty much our responsibility back then was putting out fires.

DM: Did everyone eat in the same cafeteria?

OS: Yes.

DM: Was it separated? Could you see the clear color lines or did everybody eat together

OS: I left there in '89 and I imagine I could walk in there today and see pretty much the same thing, black students eating here, white students eating there. I know it happens in some schools today and I think it is a wonderful thing where they mix and eat with people that they don't know. Owen High School had that there, but I don't know if other schools in the area are doing it or not. It is called a mix-up. Invariably, it happens whether you are in UNCA or Chapel Hill when the groups go from their schools or their jobs, they usually sit together instead of looking for someone they don't know so that they can meet new people. The cafeteria was one of the sore spots, I thought, having to go down into a lower place and not having proper lighting as far as students getting together lunchtime. Most of your fights were held I think, if you're going to have one, in the cafeteria, because you put everybody in there. We had two lunch periods and I think we had 5,000 or 6,000 students that first year. I'm thinking that I might be wrong on the number, but we had the third largest, if not the second largest, graduating class in the early 70's. Wesley and Greensboro might have had the largest numbers. When you brought all 600 or so students or Asheville High plus what they had, of course that number was pretty large. We were strong 4A for a long time.

DM: Do you remember any particular names of students who were involved in those early years of student government, black and whites working together either right before integration or afterwards?

OS: Well, you had George Groom, who should be in that early report, Jessica Callum and Cynthia Hallum who was Jacquelyn's cousin. Cynthia's son was the son that was killed in that automobile accident down near Hickory. They would know which students were involved. I can't find the report, but I had a report from Dr. Jones' daughter, a dentist here, she did a detailed report on the integration here in Asheville. It is very detailed. She interviewed quite a few people. If you have one, it is a lot of information in there based on possibly who the students were. The people in the community were terribly upset with it because of the unrest.

DM: Would you say that this was a student directed walk out or would you say that there were other people on the outside encouraging this?

OS: There were outsiders, yes, and in the report I just spoke of interviewed the judgment in there that organized. Yes, there were outsiders and of course you must remember that in Western North Carolina, we are in an area where people were not as aggressive or assertive as maybe in other areas. So, in order to get the leadership that they were looking for, they had to find people who were brave enough to stand up and speak out and rebel against it. That's how that came about.

DM: Were there any rules or regulations geared specifically toward African American community students coming into Asheville High?

OS: No. The dress code always said something at the top and something at the bottom. Shoes, ya know it was pretty general. We have come almost 360 degrees as to what would be accepted now compared to then. I am trying to think of what the attire was then. Back at that point, just to tell you how far we go back, it was almost forbidden for women to wear pants, because I can remember the first teachers to wear pant suits and what have you and how it upset so many other teachers. So, that was a time that we were living in. That was the time prior to the hippies coming in. I was the Dean of Boys during the first part of my administration at Asheville High and kids were into the hallucinating drugs then, such as LSD. A parent would call saying such and such can't come today, because he is hallucinating. These were the kinds of things that were going on and integration was right in the midst of all of this. We were trying to adjust to that and we were trying to adjust to what the world was doing and we were trying to adjust to the political aspect of it. I have to be stupid, but I say that it was an exciting time.

DM: You mentioned about the teachers. What was it like for the teachers to integrate the staff? Were the other students from South French Broad brought over to Asheville High^{1*}

OS: Believe it or not, there were 25 of us who went to Asheville High School out of about 50, because we left the ninth grade intact. You see we only went 10th, 11th and 12th. You didn't have the ninth grade at the high schools at that point. There is only one teacher still at Asheville High and that is Mr. Hammond.

DM: Do you know an estimate of how many black and white kids didn't integrate, just refused to go to school or to Asheville High?

OS: I never heard, but that would be interesting to know. I don't know of any that did not go, but I'm sure there were some who went to private schools if they were white and if they were black and age 16 dropped out. However, I don't recall anyone ever saying that students, and a lot of students didn't feel comfortable being there, but I am quite sure that some of your private schools, for example Durham all of a sudden your academies start coming up and that's exactly what was happening there. No schools to my knowledge at that time reached out to those disgruntled students.

DM: During the interview with the class of 1975, they talked about a second riot. It sounds like that one might have been more difficult.

OS: I think the first riot might have been more difficult because that was more physical. That was when the building came under attack. I have to think about what brought on the second riot.

DM: I think they said that it was between blacks and whites about boyfriends and girlfriends and that kind of stuff.

OS: I never got that part of it.

DM: These students remembered that the town was under curfew.

OS: Yes. The first one, we were under a curfew. It was like any other curfew, from dawn to dark and that kind of thing and policemen would stop people if they were suspicious. It was just almost a lock-down and making sure that people had proper identification if they were from the area. A lot of other areas, you gotta remember that Asheville was kind of on the slow side of riots. It happened in many other cities on a large scale. But, there were people coming in and people coming in and out of Asheville to land assistance.

DM: Some of the students talked about in '72 how a man was walking down a street and someone threw a brick at him terribly injuring him and he had to have brain surgery and a plate inserted into his head. They just remembered being a lot more fearful.

OS: Well a lot of that was going on. I can remember, I didn't see it, but you hear a lot of stories. There on Patton Avenue, I think there was a theatre somewhere near Kress. Do you recall that? Yes. Some of the kids would pass that night going toward Eagle Street and I recall hearing that one of our students, I don't remember his name, had a big, long chain that he attacked this fellow with. He didn't kill him, but struck him several times. So, we had all kinds of things that were going on. It was a fearful thing for a lot of people who feared their life.

DM: At the first graduation after integration, were diplomas given out by a black principal to the black students and by a white Principal to the white students or was it just random?

OS: If I recall, we held it at the Thomas Wolf Auditorium and our Principal at that time was Clark Pentle and he gave them to everyone. But Clark always refused, if you have any documentation, to be interviewed on the integration thing at all. Have you ever talked to him or attempted to talk to him? He lives, in fact I'll see him tomorrow. He finished up at the superintendent's office and I'm trying to think of where he lives. I think he lives out near Arden or Fletcher or somewhere in that area. Weaverville, no he's in the Weaverville section. No, we never did that.

DM: And sports were just picked up where they left off then?

OS: In the sports part of the integration, there were no problems at all. It's almost like music. If you go back and look at black segregation and what have you, music was the bridge that brought everyone together. After the Jackie Robinson thing, sports became... because people were looking for winners and it didn't make any difference what color you were. Sports stayed intact. Of course, there were parents who felt that their kids should be playing quarterback instead of... I always tell Fogle, in fact I told Lou Fogle not long ago, he was with us during those riots. Have you ever talked to him? Did you know Coach Fogle? He just retired. He could give it to you from the sports aspect, of course, some of the things that went on. He was there as our football coach, of course he left. When I went back to Asheville High in '77, they were looking for a coach shortly thereafter. They went to South Carolina, interviewed him and brought him back, because he held together, he had certain basic Principals that athletes should adhere to and he was very instrumental in doing this kind of thing. I can recall incidents that happened that he would never let get out of control, whereas another coach would not have been able to do so.

DM: Was Coach Hammond coaching when he first came?

OS: Yeah, Coach Hammond and I were together at Stephens Lee and he was coaching. Ever since I've known him, he's always been a coach.

DM: I remember Shirley Whitesides being talked about as one of the first African American teachers that... is that right?

OS: I don't know how far Shirley goes back. She might have been, but I don't remember Shirley until up in the years. But if she says she's the first I remember Mark Early being there early. Mark and I were at South French Broad together. I think when we left South French Broad in '67-'68, he went to David Millard. So, Shirley might have been there. But I do know some of the early black teachers who went to Lee Edwards. See what happened was they started selecting teachers to go to Lee Edwards before we integrated. Lucille Burton went there, Malachai Cromartie went there and Aaron Hathe went there. I often think that that was a test case to see how the students would react. I remember those three.

DM: How did the students react?

OS: No problem.

OS: Well that was just the way of life. It's supposed to be this way. I'm not a racist, I'm just basically doing what I've always been taught to do. However, there is always a conversion. You don't die a racist just because you were a racist. So, a lot of people have jumped on the bandwagon over the years. I've even wondered, we are the products of what we have been taught and we act it out. Every argument, I must say it in this, I'm not going to be any different, integration should have started in the churches. Integration should have started in the first grade. When you put a group of teenagers or almost adults together and expect them to interact when they've never been with each other. Same

thing with teachers. There were a lot of teachers who had difficulty teaching black students or teaching white students. It was an experience that they never had. Now when they come up from first grade up to the point they are now, the exposure has been there. Many of our kids are limited in this area because there are so few black students, black people period. They've never seen so many. I finished A&T State University and I go back every year just to see that great number of black people. It's just good to see. So many times here, and it never bothered me, because I was always able to adjust, but many of my classes at Western and many of my involvements here, I've been the only black person. Ya know, I just accept it. A lot of people might have felt uncomfortable, just like you put one white person with a bunch of blacks, they would have the same kind of feeling unless they are able to deal with it. I met a young man the other day that spoke out at Montreal and he is from Detroit. He was a little older than most students in that class and he wanted to know how can I interact with the black community. I told him to just be honest. Don't try to be phony, don't try to overdo it, because people will spite you if you are not true to what you are trying to do. So, there are still a lot of people having difficulties adjusting to each other.

DM: Did you ever have any particular stories out of these accounts of your own experiences of people who were racist?

OS: Oh Gosh! I had been a black administrator just for the white kids. You can imagine what I had. I was an oreo, I was whatever you wanted me to be. But then, I felt good about myself. Parents would call up and if it was after hours and something would happen at school, the kids would go home and tell it that I did so and so or I said so and so. But, I guess the way I was brought up, I was able to stand my own and have control to the point where I respect you and you respect me. There were parents, of course, that decided that their child was always right and I'm the one who sent them home. Back then we did some paddling, believe it or not. We busted behinds in a minute. I mean, you do that or you go home. I thought if I can't discipline them, you keep them home until you can discipline them. I always had the backing of my administrators. No one ever really came after me. I guess it helps being 4' 11.

DM: What were some of the common problems? Were there any other specific places besides the cafeteria that generated more problems? Any teachers that quit because they didn't want to teach some of the students?

OS: Oh yea. We had several teachers. When we first integrated the schools, there were teachers that had been there for many years and the word came back to us that they were not going to teach black students, so they quit, which was the best thing for them to do. We had a math teacher, and I was at South French Broad and heard about this, there was a friend of mine who was an artist and his wife was an elementary teacher. They were having a lot of troubles with their daughter. They were one of the better families, ya know whatever that may mean, but she had a very difficult time in that teacher's room. So, I kind of had some background on her. It was my job, we divided the staff up for evaluation. It so happened that she was in my group. We had a very friendly chat and I wanted to know how she related and how she was getting along. She point blank told me

that she didn't like teaching poor white kids and black kids. I told her that this is a public school and either she teach them or she needed to find her a private school. Believe it or not, she came to UNCA and I wonder whatever happened to her. I doubt if she is here now. She was in the math department. There were teachers who, I have a black teacher, a friend of mine, in the early, early days of integration, she was an elementary teacher. She could not stand to run her hands or touch a white kid. I told her she was going to have to get over that if she was going to stay with it. So, there are all kinds of phobias and all kinds of stupidities when we let these kinds of things enter into our psyche. We're teaching human beings, we're teaching children. I know as well as you know that there are certain approaches that you must use and there are certain ways that you must do things. I used to tell the white teachers that I always felt that I was a strong disciplinarian. If you were in a class with me, you were there to learn, not to wear a hat, not to sleep and I don't care what color you are. If I went by a room and you were sitting in there with a hat on, I would come in and get the hat, because hats were out and if you were sitting there asleep, I'd come in and wake you up. I would later talk to the teacher. I guess being my age and knowing the time that I came along, the black teachers had a genuine concern, and I'm not saying that the white teachers didn't, but they had a genuine concern that you were going to learn. They held you accountable. Too often today and not in every situation, we find too many people who are too concerned with being popular. They'd let people slide. I can bet that every student who finished 10-12 years ago can remember that teacher who required you to have that work done and done correctly versus that teacher who just let you slide. I always said that taught for the future and what it would be like 20 years from now. A lot of our teachers just didn't want to say, okay, I'm going to be, not tough, I'm going to be consistent and demanding that you do your best.

DM: Did the teachers ever have Christmas parties?

OS: The teachers are not necessarily swingers. We had little things.

DM: Was there integration on a social level?

OS: Some of us did. When I was a teacher, there were segments of us that got together, whether I was at South French Broad or whether I was at Asheville High. As far as office parties and similar things to that were seldom if ever. I don't know how many people had been at each other's homes, that was never a concern of mine. But there were some people who developed good relationships.

DM: They didn't have anything to teach them during integration about the African American culture or anything like that?

OS: I'm glad you mentioned that. That was one of the problems. There were two things missing. Under the protest, they wanted a black cosmetology teacher, that's in your report some place, and we got one, Ms. Edington. The next thing was to develop a curriculum for black studies. We got that, kept it for about four years and no black students enrolled. So, it had to be integrated into a U.S. History class. I mean it is

basically what Ms. Burrs teaches down there now. Jackie was taught by Gladys Forney, that name should ring a bell somewhere in your report. Jackie, we always called her the black Gladys; her program was basically mixed cultures or various cultures. I don't know, I'd like to see one of the U.S. History books since I used to teach it. But there was very little to none in the history books about blacks except for the colonial days and a few things here and there and I'm sure it's probably come full circle now. It should. That was one of the reasons that Carter G. Woodson started the black history week and month, was to bring forth the black history so that the blacks could be exposed to it.

DM: So, that goes back to the original set of demands?

OS: Yes. Those were the two things that I failed to mention.

DM: During the second riot, the students recalled being told to get into the buses and they recalled seeing people bleeding on the steps.

OS: I don't remember, I remember the second riot. It was my job to go to the vocation building to keep everything safe there. I remember someone was struck and there was some bleeding, but I don't recall too much now or how severe it was.

DM: Was there any interracial dating?

OS: I'm sure there was. I'll never forget once, we had a deal of girls that had been there since the Lee Edwards days and of course, she was more concerned with whom was dating whom than I was. We walked up on several people from time to time and I would just say, "Okay, you need to move on." She'd almost go out of her skin if that were happening.

DM: Do you mean kids just making out or black and white?

OS: Black and white, yeah. DM: So, tell me what she wanted.

OS: She would want discipline action. I looked at it from the standpoint that it was a male/female situation. We'd just catch them seriously making out and I didn't see any laws being violated. But to her, that was definitely a no-no. I never knew any teacher during the time that I was there, at least they never brought it to me, they might have brought it to someone else, they really got bummed right out of their skull because quite a few black and whites were dating, shortly thereafter integration.

DM: Did the prom happen and all the normal stuff like that?

OS: You know it's the funny thing about prom. I remember reading some little place a couple years ago refused to have prom. We had them and people danced with people of their own. Music was the biggest thing. Trying to get the music that the blacks

would dance to and the whites would dance to was the biggest thing I ever saw or heard of. So, we always made sure the band could play "Proud Mary" and whatever else was necessary and kids could socialize. I was asking someone not to long ago, up until about, I think the class of 1970 or 1971, I went back to introduce that class. That was an all black class reunion. However, they extended the invitation, they had about 25 whites. I guess until about the early 80's, they were having separate reunions. The black students were having this and the white students were having that. The early 70's were so bitter with each other. You can't have a reunion with people you didn't know or didn't care for. But in the early 80's, I think they started having reunions with everyone and bringing everybody in. See, you can understand them being that way because they never developed a relationship during those early 70's. I guess the early 80's was when they started crossing boundaries and having classes together, fellowshipping and doing things like that.

DM: This was really great! Do you have anything that you feel like we didn't ask or any particular stories?

OS: There are some things that I'd like to sit down and think about myself. Some periods of times and things that actually happened. I'm trying to reflect back on our early junior/senior proms. The economy and social life of Asheville and everything else was its separate way as well. That was before Model Cities and during the time that model city was coming in, rejuvenating the city and all that, people have been shifting. Now, believe it or not, we're going back to segregating communities and segregating schools.

DM: That's why I asked about the cafeteria, because at Asheville High now they have the lunchroom downstairs and the area upstairs where they can eat in either place and it allows the students to separate themselves.

OS: When that library was built, that was for the seniors. All seniors would eat upstairs, but now it's a choice. There's something about sitting down and eating that brings about a different kind of fellowship than anything else. I was in Greensboro last Saturday and I took a couple of white females with me to a conference. I took them by A&T and showed them the four young men who sat down in Greensboro. We were going to go by Woolworth's, but the South has had this thing about sitting down and eating. I don't know what it is. There was a young man, a writer named Harry Golden from Charlotte, NC, do you remember that name? Years ago, he said the best way to cure the segregation at lunch counters is to take away all the chairs and seats away and make everybody stand up. It makes a lot of sense.

DM: Did we ask any questions about Francine?

OS: I don't recall. I remember her being here. Logan and I were together at Hill Street. Some of the AKA's would know about her being here.