

Unitarian Universalist Church of Asheville
Oral History Collection
Interview with Marion Williams Stivers, December 29, 1992
Interviewed by Dorothy Joynes

Dorothy: This is December 29, 1992, Dorothy Joynes talking with Marion Stivers about her experiences in Unitarianism and in Asheville, particularly with her teaching and her experiences with the schools. So would you first tell me about your experiences first coming into the city and discovering Unitarianism.

Marion: Well, we first came into Asheville on a vacation, looking for a place to live that had a milder climate. Dave, my first husband, had been with Sears Roebuck for years and had left them, and had this little nest egg, and we were looking for a place to start again, which his family thought was not very wise because we had two children then, aged four and six and with no job prospects it wasn't very smart to go off into the wild blue yonder and start over. But nevertheless, that's what we intended to do. We came into Asheville on a hot August afternoon. We came through the tunnel from the east, in a car that was not air conditioned. It had been hot all the way across, and suddenly when we came out of the west side of that tunnel, we thought we were in the promised land. It was a beautiful clear day, one of the few clear days in August that I've seen since I've been here, in the thirty years since. But anyway, we drove into Pack Square. At that time there was a little information booth right there in downtown where now the BB & T building is. We walked up to it. They were just closing up, it was 5:00 in the afternoon, and the Information Booth closed right in Dave's face, so we never got a chance to ask any directions or anything. We didn't know where we were going to stay. At that time Tunnel Road didn't look quite like it does now, but it was a commercial street even then and had a few motels on it. So we remembered the Three As, and we went to the Three As office which happened to be right on Pack Square there. We walked in and there was a lady that was sitting there. We told her we were looking for an apartment or some place to stay for a week, because we were on a very low budget at that time. She said, Oh I have a friend who has an apartment, she said, that might work out for you. Anyway, she took a half hour with us, and then we found out that she didn't even work for the AAAs. She worked for the insurance company that was in the back of this building that was sharing the same space. This was the kind of hospitality that we ran into in Asheville, our first initial introduction.

Dorothy: Had you been in the city before?

Marion: No, never been here before.

Dorothy: And you came from where?

Marion: We came from Pennsylvania. We had been living in Bradford, Pennsylvania, which is right up near the New York border. The snow was 30 feet a year, the expected snow.

Dorothy: How did you hear of..

Marion: Well, we visited friends in Greensboro, and they thought Greensboro was a great place to live. And years ago, I can remember, my mother had gone through Asheville, and I said, well, we are this close to Asheville, let's just go over and take a look anyway. So that's how we happened to look at Asheville. So we still had no place to stay, and that's how we realized that this person didn't even work for AAAs and we were keeping her overtime. We apologized and left, and went across to Peterson's Grill. It's Chris Peterson, who's now on City Council, it's his family's business. I got a newspaper and looked through, and under apartments, furnished apartments, there was one on Lakeshore Drive, newly furnished, a new apartment in a private home with antiques and no children it said. I showed this to David and he said, "Well Marion, it clearly says no children, so what do you plan to do with our two children for this week, chloroform or what?" And I said, "Well, I know it said no children, but I'm going to call anyway." And I called, and it happened to be the new home, just put up by the Blackards, who was then the minister of the Methodist church down there, Central Methodist Church. Lovely people, and she and I just seemed to hit it off on the telephone, and she said, well, it's true, we didn't want children, but you said they are well behaved, so she said, let's give it a try. She said you're new in town, so I will meet you at the Winn Dixie down on Merrimon Avenue and lead you up. Well, it was just beautiful. We went up to this beautiful new home overlooking Beaver Lake, in this apartment that looked luxurious, really, and we stayed there for a week. And during that week, Margaret Blackard took us on a trip up on Horizon Hill, at that time the road was not completed beyond this house here, the house next door, the Olsen's house. And she drove us up at night to look at the city from the top of Horizon Hill. We looked down, and it was just like Christmas, with all the lights and downtown blazing before us, and I turned to Dave and said, "Oh, Dave, how long do you suppose before we could afford to live up here?" And he said, "Marion, you really are a dreamer!" (laughs) But, ironically, I have gotten on top of Horizon Hill. It took years, and another David, but that David and I lived on the south side of Lookout Mountain, which is Horizon Hill, so we were pretty close very soon. But we didn't know that property was going to come on the market. So, we both fell in love with Asheville, and wondered how we were going to be able to survive here, but we knew we wanted to. And so, when we first moved into town, we looked for places that we could afford, and we bought a house over on Montford, which we thought was going to be the Dupont Circle area of Asheville very soon, because it had the lovely old houses, and it was right by downtown. And we thought people like us would be buying them and restoring them and it would be a lovely neighborhood. Well, we were just thirty years ahead of our time, because I think that's really happening now. But back then, it just was very slow moving. The Asheville economy was slow in the 1960's, and I, with two little children, I didn't think I could go out to work, I didn't want to really because they were both early school age, and I wanted to be home with them. And so we were looking really for another investment...Oh, that particular house already had, it was in three apartments, it had been divided up, so we could live in one apartment, and rent out the other two. Which we did. But then Dave came home one day, and he said, "I've just seen a property that you're going to really be interested in. It's one of the prettiest places I've ever seen in my life." He said it isn't exactly an apartment house like we had in mind, but he said I'd like you to see it. And he said, "Marion, this time, I hope you will keep your mouth closed (laughs) when we look at it. And the reason he said that was because when we bought this place on Montford, a Mrs. Ledbetter owned it. It's a lovely old historic home, I'm trying to think of the name, it's quite well-known, the Hewitt home, it was the Hewitt home on Montford. They had a center entrance hall, a beautiful leaded glass window, about twelve feet wide, and this

grand entrance and this circular stairway going up with a sun porch across the landing of the stairway, and this dear, old real estate agent who was taking us around, Mr. Gore, and he lived on Merrimon Avenue at that time, in the building that's now, oh it's been a couple of things, it's still a house though, it's right next to the all-aluminum place on Merrimon Avenue, where the Gores live. He was really a laid back gentleman, and he said, "Well, I know what you folks are interested in, I think, I don't know, Mrs. Ledbetter gets it in her mind to sell the place, and then again she decides not to," he said. "I don't know what mood she's in now, but I'll just give her a call." It happened she was in the mood to sell, or thought she might, but anyway she was showing the house. She led us up the stairway, and we had come, of course, from the Washington DC area, we had only been in Pennsylvania one year. So we were familiar with Washington DC real estate and prices. And this house was priced at \$13,400. It was already remodeled into apartments, and I thought it was just a steal. Something like you coming from California right now, thinking what the real estate values are here as compared to what California was. As she was leading us up this stairway, David behind me, and I was right behind her, I said "Oh, Mrs. Ledbetter, as far as I'm concerned this house is sold already." And I heard this dull thud behind me, it was Dave going down the stairs, because it was not the thing to say, when he was planning to offer less. But I just thought that would have been awful, to offer less on that house (laughs), it was worth, I thought, a lot more. So anyway, he warned me on this one. Then when he brought me up also to the property that we called High Haven, it was the O. D. Revell estate, built in 1929, copied from an Indian villa, so it had doubly high ceilings and a veranda all around two sides, and a view of the city, and about four acres, I think, four acres of land with it. It had been beautifully landscaped. In fact, Dave said before you see this place, I want you to know that you are going to have to change your idea about irises. He said, I know you've never particularly liked irises, and he said there are 53 varieties of irises on this place! It was springtime, and as we drove up the circular driveway, 53 varieties of irises were in bloom all across the stone wall and up above it, dripping down off the top wall was creeping phlox, sort of a mauve color, it was spectacular. My mouth was open, but I didn't say anything (laughs). So anyway, to make a long story short, we did buy that, we bought the place, and ran it as an inn, as a bed and breakfast. Called it High Haven, "an inn of distinction in the Land of the Sky." We didn't exactly get rich from it, but we survived for a few years, and then we remodeled it into apartments. And now it is run as a bed and breakfast called the Bridle Path Inn, and they are doing very well. They have a very good Atlanta clientele that comes, so it keeps them really busy.

Asheville at that time in the 1960s was a smaller community than it is now. We felt that, coming from a bigger city, that it had a lot of cultural advantages for a town of its size. Because of being a retirement center for years and years and years, I think. For instance our introduction by the Blackards, they were world travelers and she had come from a family of means. Her uncle or her father was a governor of Massachusetts and she had grown up in Massachusetts. We met a lot of people that had come, cultured people, and for a town to have a symphony orchestra, in this size town, we thought that was impressive, and enough talent here that even their amateur theatricals were very good. It kind of had an added bonus because you knew someone who was in the cast, you knew someone personally. So we really thoroughly enjoyed that. And then it was sort of a bonus, for me, to have a Unitarian Fellowship here at that time. We didn't come because of that, in fact I didn't even know if there'd be one here, but I was delighted to find there was. And when we visited this little congregation over there in the house in West Asheville, I felt right

away this is where I belong. But David said when we were trying to get a business started that probably we should belong to Central Methodist Church. And Embrey Blackard who was our friend by then, and the minister, he said, well Marion we have Unitarians on our Board, he said, you can believe as you do and be a Methodist. But as I went to the service, I didn't think I could. I really couldn't justify it to myself. That's why I'd be interested in your present reactions. So, I joined the Unitarian Church, but Dave didn't, until years later. I don't know how many years later. Seven or eight years later he decided to join, but he didn't join when I did. The people, the quality of the few people who were there, was very impressive to me. Ruth Melcher, who moved away to Knoxville. In a small group like that, when you have just a few people, each of them have to be willing to give so much more. They just don't get lost in the crowd, something like that. Helen Reed, who is still a member of the church, still living, was one of those early ones, and the minister was probably the strongest attraction for me. It was Dan Welch who was a small balding man, gentle, and really epitomized what I thought a church leader should be. Very self-sacrificing, I don't know that we paid him peanuts, I can't remember what it was, but I remember that it was practically nothing, but he was only considered a part-time minister. He didn't really want to be full-time, but it turned out to be a lot more full-time than we intended. And his wife, who was really a character, she would come to church and mutter all through the service. If you sat anywhere near her you were really distracted because she was talking back to him all the time while he was up there trying to give the sermon (laughs). And she would tell people right when she met them, well you know, I'm not a Unitarian. We thought, we are going to make a little sign for her, and have her wear it, I'm not a Unitarian (laughs). And then he retired and they moved to Knoxville. But they stayed with us a few times at the Inn, when they would come back. When he would come back, she didn't come with him. And then he died shortly after that.

The next minister we had I really didn't care for, that was Dick Gross. He had a very interesting wife, Goody. He and his wife also stayed with us a little bit at the Inn. It was one of the advantages of having an inn, because when people came into town and we had room they stayed with us for a while and we got to know them a little better. Dick Gross stayed about five years, I think. We didn't grow a lot under him, so I don't think I was the only one who was lukewarm about Dick Gross. He used to take an article in the New York Times and just give you a book review of articles that you could do yourself. He wasn't the great thinker, I don't think. His sermons were shallow, I think.

Dorothy: Did your children attend?

Marion: Yes, the children went. Mrs. Lindsey was there then, and both of the older children went until they were teenagers. We've had difficulty, I've always had difficulty keeping my children in church school. After they get to the social teenage years, because the Unitarian church being small enough, they never socially...

Dorothy: Did you have LRY [Liberal Religious Youth] at the time?

Marion: Yes, we did, but they didn't either one of them care for the group that was in it. So I've often said, Morgan, my twenty-four-year-old son, came about partly because of Lillian Lindsey. I went in there one day, into the room where the children were, and there was Lillian just sitting there without anyone. And she said, Mrs. Williams, these Unitarians just

aren't having babies any more. I guess I won't have a job for very long [laughs]. The next year I presented her with a little one, and I told her I did it for her. Morgan came along at a time when the Unitarian population was very small. She was great with the children, and I think a really great influence.

Dorothy: She'd been with that church a long, long time. You'd worked very hard with the church. What was your favorite job?

Marion: Well, I don't know. I enjoyed being the flower chairman as much as any. I had that job the longest, maybe five years or so.

Dorothy: That was when you were on Vermont?

Marion: No, that was after we were in the church where we are now. I don't know, I did different things...

Dorothy: You are working in the office now, and you are working on the dinners, you had a lot of different jobs.

Marion: That's true. I did the Sharing Suppers for quite a few years. I enjoyed that. I probably enjoyed that even more than the flowers. I'd kind of forgotten that I'd done that long ago. This last stint we only did that for a year and now someone else is doing it. The Sharing Suppers were fun to do because you got to talk to the new people and it was fun mixing people up. And I guess I believe in it, too, as a vehicle of the church, a good way for people to get acquainted.

Dorothy: You didn't feel there was much growth during Gross' time.

Marion: No.

Dorothy: When did you begin to blossom?

Marion: When Tracy Pullman came on board.

Dorothy: Tell me about it.

Marion: Tracy Pullman came from Detroit, and he came because he wanted to go into a smaller church and cut his work load. Well, it's true it was a smaller church when he came, but he was so dynamic, and they just drew people like bees to honey, and it became a much bigger job than he really wanted it to be. Also, coincidentally with that, but he was a big part of it, we had friends, Logan and Mary Jane Robinson that were just dating at that time. Logan had been married, but he was divorcing his wife. Mary Jane, my friend, was Mary Jane Wintery, and she was a Unitarian. When she and Logan started dating he would come occasionally to church. That was a very fortuitous situation for this church because Logan was the son of Reuben Robinson who founded Champion Paper and Fiber. Logan had gone to med school, and according to Helen Reed who had experience with him as a doctor, I think he operated on her mother or something, he was really a very good surgeon. But he didn't like surgery that well, and he went into industrial medicine. When he met Mary Jane

that is what he was doing, the industrial medicine. We became friends, in fact we went on their honeymoon trip with them down to the Caribbean which was quite an experience. He was friends with the Duncans who owned the poultry business. What's the big poultry business in North Carolina? I can't think of it. But anyway, the Duncans were friends of his and Duncans had just bought a plane from Haile Selassie, and were going to take a trip to the Caribbean and it would hold about 25 people, and they asked Logan and Mary Jane to bring along anyone they would like, and so they brought the Williamses and a couple of other people. It was a marvelous experience for us. Because of Logan's connections with the church, his sister had this property on Edwin Place that was getting to be a burdensome tax problem for her, and Logan got the idea that maybe she could sell it to the church, at a loss, or something, it was some kind of a tax problem. But it was a great advantage to the church at that time. And Reuben, his father, who had never really been a practicing Unitarian, his wife had been a Unitarian before he married her in Ohio. So there was that connection too, which made it very nice. And he agreed to help in this transition and to acquire the property and to build the church. And it all just kind of blossomed beautifully at that time, with the property and then I believe Reuben agreed to match funds that the church could raise, a certain amount of money. And then we had Tracy Pullman who was just adored by, not just the Unitarians, but the Asheville community accepted him very well. He was a man of really great stature, that ordinarily a little community like Asheville wouldn't have gotten. Except that he wanted to cut his work load, and we're very glad he did. So we were really off and running. And then Bill Moore came forward, another old friend of ours, and he was an architect here, a member of the congregation, and he inspired that building, which I think is really a lovely building.

Dorothy: Can you tell me some more about the building, because the design is so unique, and it says a great deal about the people, the way he constructed it.

Marion: Well, Bill Moore is a devotee of Frank Lloyd Wright. He graduated from North Carolina State architectural school, which is a very fine architectural school, it is the only one in the state, or at least it has been, there may be another one that I'm not aware of, but up till the time I retired in 1989 it was the only architectural degree program in the state of North Carolina. It was very difficult to get in there. Bill had been, I guess maybe by that time, had had ten years experience as an architect. He had done things for the Park Service, some of the things on the Parkway, the stone buildings and things Bill has designed. He is very interested in the area, he loves the area, and environmentally pleasing buildings, and I think he really was inspired in that building. He was very happy to get that particular stone mason, who did the stone work for the building. I was on the decorating committee for the new building, and that was fun to do. We had great discussion over the carpet in the sanctuary, what color it should be. I felt very strongly it should be a vibrant color, because of all the stone, to liven up the place. It should be a happy place, it should not be a place that is mournful, funeral place. And actually that carpet has held up very well, I'm surprised as to how good it still looks after all these years.

Dorothy: What were some of the comments about the desires of the committee for colors and such?

Marion: Well, we had some that thought that it should be serene and quiet, a calming inspirational place. There were different opinions of what kind of an atmosphere you

should have in a sanctuary. Some felt it should be more cathedralish, maybe, but it wasn't cathedralish because of the way it was designed, very contemporary. I don't remember, we didn't have a lot of controversy, we all worked together pretty well.

Dorothy: Was there a lot of discussion about the design of the church itself?

Marion: No. My recollection of that is that Bill pretty much had carte blanche, and when he presented, you might really like to talk to him about this because he can give you all the details. He would submit these drawings, and there were different adjustments that had to be made along the way, but I don't think there was anything major.

Dorothy: Then you also had to think in terms of planning the building of the church school later, and adjust for that as you were able to raise more money. And you had drives.

Marion: Yes. We did think about those other houses that we hoped when the time came that they would become available on that block, that we would eventually buy some more of the houses. But we also thought, the philosophy then was, that when the church gets big enough to fill this, then it's time to build another church in Asheville, or in the Asheville area. Because we were the only one east of the Mississippi for a long time in this part of the state. I don't mean east of the Mississippi, but we were the only Unitarian church for a long time, I think in the 1960s when we came. There wasn't anything west of Charlotte, but they have sprung up.

Dorothy: This is pretty much of a Bible Belt through here.

Marion: Yes.

Dorothy: What were the reactions of the community for and against the church. Were there any feelings...

Marion: That's why the minister was so important, and still is. The minister coming into a community like this has to be tactful and tolerant. I think we had some that really did more harm than good, and that's another reason that Tracy Pullman was so well received. He was very well received by the other denominations. In fact, I believe he was president at one time of the ministerial council, which speaks very well for him. Yes, in a community that was predominately Baptist and conservative, Unitarians really need to get along in a community where, to bloom where we are planted. I think we still are doing a good job on that, at least in this respect. The Christian Ministry? The Unitarians contribute quite a lot to that, and I think they are very well respected in the Christian Ministry group.

Dorothy: What has happened in the last ten years with the gay rights and the Unitarian church and its standing in the community? Can you speak to this?

Marion: No, not too well. I do know that they meet at the Unitarian Church, and it has housed the group for their meetings. I think this is something that has just come to the fore in about the last five years. Asheville itself, I understand, is becoming sort of a gay center for this whole western region, but I don't know personally much about that.

Dorothy: Has there been any reaction on the part of the parishioners?

Marion: Well, I've heard comments that we don't certainly want to become known as the gay church, and some may feel that we don't want to emphasize that, you can offer a meeting place and be tolerant of it, but not to foster it and really go on the bandwagon for the cause. I think there are feelings like that among us older folks, I'm not sure how the younger...

Dorothy: The church also was reaching out to other people in that they fostered a family, a Vietnamese family? Do you remember anything about that?

Marion: I know that they did that, and they came, and we'd see the children in church, and I believe it was a Black Mountain family that had them, but no, I don't really know much about that, or how that worked out.

Dorothy: You've been on the Board of the church, and you've seen changes with the Board as you've been a member and very active in the church all these years?

Marion: Yes, I went on the Board back in Tracy Pullman's time. I think the Board is larger now, I think it has a few more people, it must have been about eight or ten of us on the Board at that time. Tracy would come to every Board meeting and sit there very quietly. He never really was involved unless he was called on. Very passive was the way he felt, that as a minister he should just be there as a resource. Then Bill Hammond came on board, and he was a much more take-hold type of personality. You definitely knew he was there. I was on the Board part of the time when he was minister, too. And it was very different. He would almost take over Board meetings sometimes. Just a difference in the two personalities. Jim Brewer, again, was a more passive minister as far as the Board was concerned.

Dorothy: A church almost has to spell this out to a minister before they are officially hired as to what their position would be. It would be easy for a minister to not even understand what their church wanted.

Marion: Well, I think it has more to do with the personality than it does any rules. Some see the Board as running the church, and the minister as being a part of the church, but not necessarily running the church. Other ministers maybe see themselves as the administrator. That's right, though. They should certainly understand that before they come.

Dorothy: It makes a lot of difference. Over the years that you've been a member, you've had in and out times of real responsibility. You have an overview of the feel of the church in the community as a place where you might like to go, and you said "bloom where you are planted" which I thought was beautiful. Speak to this period of time as to how you feel the church has worked with the community and how it has been a haven for the people who have found it.

Marion: Well, it's gotten much larger over the thirty years I've been there. I think its influence has also spread. I think it attracts leaders in the community, so therefore the

influence is greater. The type of people who enjoy a Unitarian church are usually assertive, active, educated people. In their lives they are in leadership positions often, and so, yes, I think the influence is enormous in the church. And that's why I think the minister is particularly important.

Dorothy: Do you feel that the church is taking an active role in their attitudes in the community and serving as a trust for their philosophical beliefs in the community? Does the church speak for the congregation in this?

Marion: Well, that is another fine line, a ticklish thing, because we are all such independent people. I think the Social Concerns Committee has this tight rope to walk. You can speak for yourself, as an independent person, but when you start speaking for the church, for instance in the gay rights thing, that's an issue that people have very strong feelings on. It's difficult to get a consensus on just what should be done.

Dorothy: How does the committee handle this?

Marion: I'm not sure. I'm not on the Social Concerns Committee, and I haven't been involved in this, but it would be interesting to know how they handle that. There are certain things that are non-controversial that I think you would get almost everyone saying yes, we believe in this, this is what we should be doing, and let's push for this, and the church can go on record. The League of Women Voters has done a very good job of change, of working for change, because they will work for issues, but not for candidates. That's how they solve that problem.

Dorothy: Have you seen the church facing this as a concern, brought to the membership so that the membership can discuss it and make a decision, or has this been something that has been necessary?

Marion: I'm not sure. You mean the Social Concerns Committee?

Dorothy: Whether issues are brought to the congregation for a decision, whether they are going to take a stand on it or not.

Marion: Yes, I think they do that at the annual meeting. At least they have in the past, given a list and asked you to rank them as to what you feel are the most important or least important.

Dorothy: So you get feedback from the congregation as to how they feel. As you look back on your time, we are almost through with this side of the tape and I know you are going to have more to say. Is there anything that we haven't discussed that you would like to say about the church and its influence on the community and on you and people that you know?

Marion: The church has certainly enriched my life, by the people that I've met and what it stands for. It's very important. I'm glad it's here, and I do think it has had a very positive influence on the community. I think the community would be poorer if it didn't have a Unitarian church.

SIDE TWO:

Dorothy: Marion, I wonder if you could tell me something about the education field that you were involved in and how you became involved and what you did, what schools were like when you first taught, oh you were a counselor, and what you found in the schools, and a general impression of Asheville schools, what they were when you went in and what they are now.

Marion: This begins in 1968 when I had my third child in October of 1968, I had a financial crisis, and I needed to think about becoming gainfully employed. I had a bachelor's degree from the University of Maryland in psychology, and a friend told me years ago that and a quarter would get me a cup of coffee. A bachelor's degree in psychology was just about as useless as anything you could have. But I had many jobs in between that time, not necessarily based on that degree. I've often said, I've been very fortunate and lucky as far as being in the right place at the right time. This certainly was true here in Asheville, when I was wondering what I was going to do to earn a living, to support myself and a new baby. My marriage was faltering and I knew it was just a matter of time before I'd be on my own. I thought the school system, the hours, would be best for me with having a child, that I'd be home more. Also, Asheville at that time, didn't offer too many opportunities for women's employment that paid more than minimum wage. So I applied to the city school system and the county school system. Incidentally I think it was that very year there had been an independent study by a Knoxville Tennessee organization that recommended the merging of the two school systems. I really thought, naive as I was, that it was just a matter of a year or two that the two school systems would be merged into one. Well, you can see that hasn't happened even yet. When I did apply I found out that the Buncombe County Schools, who had six high schools and Asheville City had one, my chances were much greater in Buncombe County to get a job. With a degree in psychology, though, I didn't meet the requirements for a counselor, but that's what I was really interested in. I've never been interested in teaching, but I've been interested in counseling for a long time. I thought it would be interesting. So they said, "Mrs. Williams, as a matter of fact we've gotten some Title 1 money, and we're putting a second counselor in the high schools. At that time the high schools only had one counselor in them. The average high school at that time had maybe 700 students. The average county high school had a population of about 700 students. So I was fortunate in being hired at Erwin High School as the Title 1 counselor. The Title 1 counselor was to spend her efforts helping under-privileged children. Again, this was something of great interest to me. My philosophy was that students who come from good supportive families are going to get through school and succeed in spite of all the mistakes we make. But the ones who don't have that help need all the help they can get, and if I can offer any at all, it would be great. But I knew that this Title 1 money was temporary, and I was going to be out on the street again unless I could get myself certified. Again I was fortunate, in the right place at the right time. North Carolina had just changed its requirements for school counselors and you did not have to come from the classroom. Prior to that time you had to have a teaching certificate, first a teaching degree, and then go into the master's program for school counseling. And they very, in my opinion, correctly changed that to say that people from other disciplines could come into counseling if they had a bachelor's degree in a related field, which applied to me, and then go into the master's degree program. Well, I had no money to go to school, also I had this job, so I

couldn't go to school full time, because I did need to work. But I was again fortunate in getting some good guidance from a co-worker. They said there is some money for staff development in Buncombe County, and it's not generally known, it isn't a whole lot of money, but most people aren't even aware of it. And sure enough, that year's amount had not been applied for, and so Marion was there to apply for this grant, and got it. It took me a year, two summers and a winter, to get my masters in school guidance and counseling at Western Carolina. It was difficult though for me because I had to drive to Cullowhee from Asheville for the classes. I had an old Corvair that used to hydroplane every time a truck went by, and I used to wonder if I was going to make it home or make it out there. But I did. This added the second counselor to a high school. To let you know how far they've come since that time, I retired in 1989 from Enka High School, and at that time there were four counselors, one for every grade level in the high school, and a full-time secretary in the guidance department. So Buncombe County has really come a long way. One of the measures of quality of a high school in this state has been how many Morehead Scholars did the high school produce. Morehead left his millions to Chapel Hill. The criteria for a Morehead scholarship is probably the highest of any I know about, and it's highly competitive. It's a full scholarship to four years plus a trip to Europe one summer and an internship in a field of your choice another summer, it's just a beautiful education. The county high schools at that time, 1968, had never had a Morehead scholarship award. Asheville High School continually picked up one or two every year. They've had a very excellent academic record, the city high school. Another local school that got its share of Morehead scholars was the Asheville School for Boys, now known just as the Asheville School, a private school, and now girls are in attendance too. They would have one or two Morehead scholars a year. The county has come along and done very well. Now I'd say it's just about even, Asheville High and the county. Occasionally the county will have one more than the city. The county academic standards have improved. In that time there have been three new high schools built and then the old high school was made into a middle school. The population too, the enrollment, has increased in Buncombe County. As you know in the last decade the city has lost people and they have moved to the county, and all the county high schools are flourishing now, and the budget has increased accordingly. The city had more per pupil than the county because the city residents pay an added assessment which gives the city high school luxuries that the county high schools don't have. For instance the fine arts building at Asheville High that was built last year. My daughter Lee had a big part in that. She started a dance program at the school about eight or nine years ago, I guess the first in the state in a public high school. She was able to have some input into the designing of this fine arts building that has very fine facilities not only for dance, a very nice dance studio, but ceramics, weaving and drama, and I think it's a pilot facility in the state of North Carolina. Fortunately for her and for those students it was built before the economic crunch of last year before the recession came along, it had already been appropriated, so they do have this very fine facility there.

Dorothy: You talked about the merging. Could you elaborate on that?

Marion: I could never understand why. It didn't make sense in a community where you have the city as part of the county, it wouldn't just be another district of a system. But I think it's been mostly political, that has kept it from happening. There would be a few jobs lost, which would be to the taxpayers' advantage because they wouldn't have to pay the salaries. One of the arguments that the county gave, back in the earlier days, was the

housing developments hadn't been completed in the county. So there were no black students in the county at all, it was completely white. All the black students were in the city. So that was one reason. The county residents didn't want to integrate their schools, they wanted to keep them the way they were, and they wanted to keep the black students where they were. Now, with the housing developments and the people moving out of the city, at least half of the county high schools were, maybe more than half now, have black students. So that argument really is no longer valid.

Dorothy: So it gets down more to the loss of jobs.

Marion: I think yes, that's part of it, but you have two superintendents that have contracts that run like three years at a time, and it seems to me that it wouldn't be that hard to eliminate them at the end of a three year contract, but it hasn't happened yet.

Dorothy: Where does this discussion come out? Where does this controversy manifest?

Marion: Well, the newspaper editorials I've read, and I don't know if each school board meeting, if they discuss it. I don't think either one of them would initiate it. The city probably wouldn't initiate it, because I think it would be dominated by the county, if it happened. And because they've been superior academically. They have a feeling that they'll get watered down if they become a part of a bigger system and that the money would be distributed more evenly.

Dorothy: The discussion then is coming more from the public rather than the people who make the decisions, is that right?

Marion: Yes, I would say so. It's been more or less political suicide for politicians to come out in favor of this.

Dorothy: Do you get much political pressure within the educational system? Did you feel this when you were there?

Marion: Well, the school board members, yes, it's been a pretty powerful position. When I first went to Erwin High School they had school committees that were very powerful that were made up of parents of that district. The parents often times were very political people who had no particular training in education. It was a good-old-boy syndrome. In fact my principal was let go from that school while I was there by the school committee. The school committee got rid of this principal. I always thought he was a very fine principal. He didn't lose out completely. He went on and had another job in the system. Yes, they were very powerful, and it was too bad because it was more based on whether they liked you or not rather than whether you were capable of doing your job.

Dorothy: This is a position that they run for politically and receive votes?

Marion: Are you talking about the school...

Dorothy: The school board.

Marion: Yes, the school board in the county is elected.

Dorothy: Why do they run? What do they gain?

Marion: Well, you like to think they are public-spirited citizens who want to improve the quality of life in the county, and I think that is true for some of them, but I think some run for the power. It is a powerful position, and they are pretty important people. They have the power to run the schools and move principals around and decide how many assistants should be, they have a lot of power, I'd say.

Dorothy: So this is individual ego, rather than a pressure group such as freeloaders wanting to open up an area would be on a particular kind of a board to further their unified interest. This would be more individual...

Marion: You're talking about individual school board member. Yes, I think the individual school board member is elected from his own district to be sure, just like our representatives in Washington, his district gets his fair share and he's there with that purpose in mind, too.

Dorothy: This would not however disrupt the level of the administration, then, necessarily.

Marion: I think traditionally the Buncombe County superintendent of schools has been a powerful figure and pretty much has run their own show. We did have some differences of opinion with the last one, the name escapes me, and his contract was not renewed. That was partly over a decision that they all made, but he got blamed for it mostly, about moving into this Square D plant. It was a very expensive move, to move all the executive administrative offices out of a school down in Biltmore out to the Square D plant by the river. It was a new facility that Square D decided they didn't need, and they sold it for, I don't remember the figure. A couple million or something. It was a pretty expensive transaction. The idea was that this factory was going to be used for the administrative offices and then vocational education, and they would pool the vocational students. For instance, they would have auto mechanics there, and any student in any school that wanted to take auto mechanics would go to this facility at Square D during the day and take his auto mechanics class. It just didn't work out because of the transportation. If the student missed this time, and he needed the requirements, he needed a certain number of hours to graduate. So the plan, I don't know if it wasn't well-enough thought out or what, but it just has not worked out that way.

Dorothy: This was a plant run by a company called Square D?

Marion: The Square D Corporation has been here, one of our more successful industries. It makes electrical components and it expanded its plant and built another plant across the road. Then business fell off or something, and they didn't need that, and they sold that facility, and the Buncombe County Schools bought it. It had no connection then with the Square D plant any more, they just bought the property.

Dorothy: This is the downfall of that particular administrator at that time because it didn't work out?

Marion: I think that had a lot to do with his contract not being renewed.

Dorothy: Did any of this have to do with your counseling, any of the pull of the separation of the two areas that were not merged, did this affect your counseling in any way?

Marion: You mean the tug of war between the city and the county? No, I guess not. I think the city system, being of such high academic quality and high standards probably helped the county. The county had something right close that people could hold up and say look, why don't you have this many Morehead scholars, or why aren't you teaching this class in physics that the city is. I think probably it helped the county improve its standards.

Dorothy: You have talked about people moving to the county. Can you talk about that?

Marion: Well, I guess every city has had this happen, that the suburbs...people have moved out of the inner city into the suburbs. Here, when we came to Asheville, downtown Asheville had not been revitalized yet. It must have been the early 1960s, because we can remember then, down around the Baptist church, First Baptist Church down there, they leveled it all around for twelve blocks in all directions, I suppose. You can tell now, all the open country, open land that is around that church, when we came there were little small cottage-type houses all over. That was all populated with little small houses. They leveled all that, and where the Radisson Hotel stands, and the Sheraton stands, the YMCA, that whole area was all low-cost housing. So it made a tremendous difference in Asheville. Of course, 240 was not through there either, then. That all came about at that time. They put through 240 and then the cut in the mountain. I remember where we lived we could see downtown Asheville very well, on the hill north of the city. In the summer time the haze would just sort of hang over the city. The environmentalists were very much against the cut, they didn't think we should carve out a mountain when we've got a tunnel, and we could put another tunnel beside it. But they lost out because the cut won as being more expedient. But when they made the cut, the interesting part was it allowed all the collected pollution from downtown Asheville to move east, the prevailing western winds just moved that out of there. So that probably helped the atmosphere in downtown Asheville.

Dorothy: The movement to the county, then, took place partly because of the revitalization of Asheville, and the movement...

Marion: No, I don't think so. I think the housing developments were pretty well because of that, that were built in the county. But I think otherwise, people moving into this area, I think the last two censuses speak to that, of how many people have moved into this area in the last twenty years, growing into this area. And they moved into the county rather than into the city.

Dorothy: There is a difference in taxes also. Does that affect people and their desire to...

Marion: Oh yes, very much so. I guess that might be one of the major reasons. The taxes are almost half in the county what they are in the city. People feel why not live in the

county where they can get almost as many advantages. In fact I guess there isn't that much difference. I would love to see it equalized, because I think it is very hard on a city to offer the services that it has to offer, and even in fact the jobs. Some people are making their money in the city, and living in the county, but they're not helping to pay for the roads and the libraries and the services that we need the city for, the hospitals...

Dorothy: And how is that being addressed?

Marion: Well, we've got county commissioners who can deal with this sort of thing. Again, it's been political suicide to do that. They have the powers, I understand the county commissioners have the power to change the tax base, but they'd never probably get elected again if they did it. But when you put people in like Patsy Kever, I like to think that we might get some people thinking about the welfare of the whole region, rather than just the squeaky wheel that is going to get some oil.

Dorothy: You have been very involved in the political world too, haven't you?

Marion: Well, I don't know very involved, but I've always been interested in politics. I think that in a democracy if you are not interested in politics it's not a very healthy attitude to have. I have people in my family that think politics is a dirty word. And it can be. But I think if you ever live in a country that isn't a democracy you realize that we are pretty lucky to have the system we do.

Dorothy: Did you feel this when you were acting as a counselor? Was this something that was brought to your attention constantly?

Marion: Oh yes. I think that no matter where we are, if you have people who are complaining about things, the way things are run, and then you ask them about voting, and they don't vote, that strikes me as really being strange, how you can complain about something and then you don't even bother to vote. Because they say there's nobody to vote for, is usually the answer I get. From even my own child. But they all voted this last time, thank goodness.

Dorothy: This last time was pretty important.

Marion: A lot of people voted this last time. I said I felt so good about this election. We left two days after the Presidential election.

Dorothy: You planned it...

Marion: I said I could have flown without an airplane, I was so high after that election (laughs).

Dorothy: I have a feeling if it hadn't been at the right time you wouldn't have gone on your trip to Australia.

Marion: It was interesting over there, the comments that some of them were leery because they knew Bush and they had known what he had done and they were kind of leery about

somebody new coming in, and others identified with Clinton very well. It's kind of interesting, it's a mixed reaction.

Dorothy: It's interesting to visit another culture like that. It gave you another opportunity. You mentioned about the revitalization of the city. Were you involved in of that in any way? Can you tell me anything about that?

Marion: No, I was only a spectator, really. Larry Holt would be a very good person for you to interview on that. He's another member of the church that's been with the Housing Authority for twenty years, I guess.

Dorothy: Was this part of the model city plan?

Marion: I'm not sure if it was or not. It sounds like it might have been.

Dorothy: What was the instigation behind it?

Marion: It was a government grant, I know, with matching funds.

Dorothy: And how was it received in the city?

Marion: I think the black community probably was not too happy about it, because they were predominantly the people who were displaced by it. It was mostly, I think, the black housing area that they tore down. I don't remember any real opposition to it. Everybody pretty much thought it was a real blessing, an opportunity.

Dorothy: There have been a number of studies, such as the one we just discussed, and there's one called "2001: Various Plans for Revitalizing the City." Are you familiar with any of those? Do you have any opinion about any of them? Do they come and go, or are people pushing for any of these studies that have been done?

Marion: I don't know, and I haven't really been active in that area.

Dorothy: Do you have any feelings about the effectiveness of the revitalization of Pack Square, whether this project of Pack Place is going to be able to be self-sustaining, do you have any thought on that?

Marion: Yes, I feel that it will be self-sustaining. This community is a very culturally oriented community, and I think the money is here. I think in time that will be self-sustaining and be another real asset for Asheville. Also, I'm pretty excited about the possibility of the Arcade building being restored to its original purpose. I was just talking to someone who works there, he's in the government, and he said that the building would be beautiful if it were restored to its original purpose. For instance, they bricked up windows and things that they can unbrick, take the brick out, and the center of that building, when they did the testing to put that building up, when Grove had his planners test that ground, that the center of that building is on ground that is so solid that it can support a thirteen story building, a tower. The government wanted to add some floors to another part of the building and they couldn't because the tests showed that it couldn't

stand that. So it was ideally situated just for this main purpose and so it will be great if we can go ahead and finish that.

Dorothy: It will be done before very long, too, they are making decisions about that.

Marion: I think so.

Dorothy: You had talked about the black community and the blacks were probably very much a part of your load as a counselor. Could you discuss the integration period and the effect of this on the community and on schools?

Marion: In our school district, the Erwin School district, we had one housing development in that district. When the blacks moved into the housing district and came over to Erwin High School, there were maybe in the high school six or seven blacks. And you had these white "mountaineer" boys, some of them from way back up in the coves, that had not really rubbed elbows with any blacks at all. But when you didn't have any more than that, they really weren't a threat, seven of them in the school, I think it was maybe the ideal way to integrate. Because they got to know them as people, as individuals. We did have a few racial incidents, but it was never anything really big.

Dorothy: Were you here when they were having the sit-ins?

Marion: Yes, in fact several of my friends, Helen Reed was one of them at Woolworth's counter, that did participate in the sit-ins, I guess Margery Lockwood, too. I was here, I don't know why I didn't participate in that, but I didn't. I guess I hadn't been here very long. I hadn't really gotten my feet on the ground yet. But several of my good friends were involved in that.

Dorothy: There have been some unpleasant instances that I read about in the newspaper with a group moving into Black Mountain. Have you heard anything about that?

Marion: No, I don't know anything about that.

Dorothy: Those were hate groups setting up headquarters in Black Mountain. I think the Klan was part of that, I'm not sure. I didn't know if you heard anything...

Marion: No, I'm not familiar with that.

Dorothy: In your counseling, could you give me an example of the kind of counseling that you did and how it worked, contact with the family, how you got extra help that was needed, and so forth, what was your experience with it.

Marion: My first task was with under-privileged children, and I guess my focus really never changed from that. I enjoyed dealing with the gifted and talented students. In my later career I also handled the exchange students from other countries, and that was really a lot of fun. But it's the under-privileged child that I really felt I could help the most and wanted to. I started out with identifying them, and I did that from the school lunch program. I'd get the list of the students who applied for free lunch. That's not an iron clad

way to get at people who are economically deprived. One of the things I found out very early in these mountains is there is a lot of pride here. There are a lot of people that would go hungry rather than admit or apply for free lunch. So part of my task was to help those people realize that it was their right to have that lunch and that we would try to give it to them in the least embarrassing way, not have them have to look any different from any other student going through that line and have to say, I'm getting a free lunch. I wasn't the only one involved in this. Many people realized that, especially on the high school level, where peer pressure is so important, you need to devise a way for people to get their lunch without others knowing. Or at least not advertising it too much. We did work it out pretty well. We had a token system, just like the others gave money, they'd give this token for their lunch. In some cases the cashiers got so they knew the students and they just kind of pretended they took the money, and they didn't take anything. And another thing, I realized that these students had not been out of their own, not just out of their own county, even out of their own roads, and their own beaten path to the store and back home. They hadn't seen what we had in our area. So I was able to plan field trips to the local plants and let them see what jobs were available, ones that they might be able to aspire to with a high school diploma, because many of them were not going to...they would be a great accomplishment just to get out of high school. They might be the only one in their family, some of them. They were graduating from high school, so that was the step we were trying to get them to. That was really rewarding. And it also acted as a good discipline tool. They couldn't go on these field trips unless they had had no problems that week in school. And we did lose a few. But the figures got better as the years went by. And some of these students even went on to college, and that was gratifying.

Dorothy: What was your contact from your office to the student's home and the administration? How did you function?

Marion: I visited student homes in the early days when I was new coming into the county. This was kind of funny: It was a provincial area, and I coming in, I didn't even have the same accent. In fact I had the school nurse test my hearing. I said, I think I have a hearing loss. The school nurse gave me a hearing test and she said, Marion you don't have a hearing loss, you just haven't learned the language yet (laughs). Which was true. I got more tuned in and I could understand better. When I had identified a student, and being mindful that I'm the outsider coming in, and that they have a lot of pride, the school nurse turned out to be a very good person and friend. She said, why don't you just come with me on my house calls, and come in with me, I'll introduce you as the school counselor. And that worked out beautifully because she already had their trust. They already knew her, and by her introducing me, it was a great way for me to enter their lives. That worked out really well. A lot of children I dealt with, I didn't really know their families, I hadn't met their families. They didn't want me to, they came from some really bad situations. There's incest, quite a lot of incest in the mountains. I was kind of surprised at that when I first realized that one girl, her father was her grandfather. It was an education for me. I know, I was going to tell you about how provincial it was. The head of the English department was a woman I really wanted to get to know, because that was the best way for us to reach the students. Every student in the class takes English. So by working through the English department you can get into the classroom. And they had English every day also. So it was very important to have a good relationship with the English department. So I was talking to her in the hallway and trying to set up a time when I could interview her, like you're interviewing me.

I said, are you from here? And she stood up to her full five feet and looked down at me and said No, I'm from Madison County [laughs]. I thought Oh my heavens, she thinks I'm from outer space, I'm not only not from Buncombe County, I'm not even from North Carolina, I'm really from far far away. It was really a closed community. People were leery of you until they got to know you.

Dorothy: Have you seen a lot of changes in the schools during your period?

Marion: Oh yes, I've seen good and bad changes. I mentioned academically, I've seen improvement academically in the caliber, in the level of academics certainly in the county schools. But I've seen more discipline problems. The teachers are spending a lot more time on discipline now than they were twenty years ago.

Dorothy: Is this the time, or drugs?

Marion: It's a breakdown in...well, one of the causes is children having children. It was shocking to me to realize that I was counseling the child of a parent that I had counseled twenty years earlier in school, eighteen years earlier. They got pregnant at sixteen, seventeen, had this child, and the child is going through the same problems that the parent went through. So, I think economics, I think the last administration, I have a chance to give my opinion on this, for the last twelve years at least, it's been pretty obvious that the Reagan/Bush administration has not put a priority on children. For us in this nation, one of the richest, I guess the richest nation in the earth to have twenty five percent of our children living in poverty is an absolute disgrace. I was in a position to feel all these things that these children didn't have that they should have had.

Dorothy: We are almost off tape. And you've almost given me the answer to my question of what would you like to see in the school systems in our country?

Marion: I would like to see accent on the child, which is our future, and they talk about investment. There is no greater investment than in a human being.

Dorothy: Bless you. This is wonderful. Thank you very much Marion. This has been a great delight for me.