

TAPE TRANSCRIPT  
Durham Civil Rights Heritage Project  
CDS, Durham, NC

**Interviewee:** Oren Marsh  
3205 Hornbuckle  
Durham, NC 27707

**Interviewer:** Cathy Abernathy  
3903 Darby  
Durham, NC 27707

**Place:** St. Joseph's AME Church  
2521 Fayetteville Street  
Durham, NC 27707

**Equipment:** SONY MZ-R700 Minidisk  
Sony microphone ECM-907

**Tape:** SONY MD-80 Tape

**Date:** January 19, 2004

**Description of Interviewee:**

**Circumstances of the Interview:**

Cathy Abernathy (CA): Today is January 19<sup>th</sup>. We're at St. Joseph's AME Church, where the Civil Rights Workers Reunion has just taken place. There was a lunch and a commemorative service, with Reverend Mack from Winston-Salem giving the address. I'm sitting here today to interview Oren Marsh, who is the musician, and has been the musician, for the Civil Rights Workers Reunion for the last four or five years. And this is Cathy Abernathy. And we'll talk about his orientation to the Civil Rights Workers Reunion, as well as his life in Durham and his comments about civil rights. Mr. Marsh, have you lived in Durham all your life?

Oren Marsh (OM): Every since I was born.

CA: That's great. And so what schools did you attend?

OM: I attended Whitted School, which later became Hillside, which is now torn down. I started school at age five, because my birthday was in November, and that created somewhat of a problem. But my mother was insistent that I go to school, because I was attending Scarborough Nursery, and the teachers told my mother that it was a waste of time, my being in school, because everything they were teaching all the other kids I already knew. And she insisted that she did not want me to have to wait another whole year before going to school. So she had a confrontation with the principal, and she won. And I attended Whitted when I was five.

When I got to the fourth grade, our family moved in the county, and I wound up going to Pearsonstown School, which is now where (Pebble Street School?) sits. It was a clapboard building, had pot-bellied stoves in the classrooms. They had two classes per room, first and second, third and fourth, fifth and sixth, seventh and eighth. We didn't have a cafeteria, we had to walk up the street to buy soup. We played in the woods behind the school. We caught the bus before day in the morning. We had three buses. Our buses crossed the Chatham County line, the

Wake County line, and the Orange County line to pick up students. We had three buses, 21, 54, and 62.

**CA:** What a memory.

**OM:** The principal was Mr. J. W. Davidson. My first teacher was—I went to the fourth grade at Whitted, and the second half of the fourth grade at Pearson town--my teacher was Mrs. Rogers, who is about ninety, and still alive. There's a much to be remembered.

**CA:** Teachers were role models in those days.

**OM:** Teachers were like gods. Teachers were like gods. I was very inspired by some of my teachers, three in particular. My music teacher was Margaret (Sharon?), who was the daughter of the late Dr. C. C. Spaulding, founder of North Carolina Mutual, one of the founders of North Carolina Mutual, and Mechanics Farmers Bank.

**CA:** You're a professional musician. When did you first know that music was your particular talent?

**OM:** I didn't. My mother perceived that. When I was two years old, she found me drumming with my fingers and humming, and she perceived that I would be playing the piano soon. My father worked out of town in the shipyards, and he'd come home about once or twice a month, because jobs were not plentiful in Durham at that time. And she spent a whole sixty dollars—sixty whole dollars—for a piano, and had it brought to our house. And I couldn't even climb up on the piano stool. I had to be helped.

**CA:** How old were you?

**OM:** Two.

**CA:** Two years old.

**OM:** Uh-huh.

**CA:** When were you born?

**OM:** 1938, November 2<sup>nd</sup>.

**CA:** Great.

**OM:** And my daddy raised the roof, because he thought it was frivolous of my mother to spend that much money on a piano that I couldn't even get up on the stool. But he later, years down the road, he looked back and saw that it was a good move. So I've been playing all my life.

**CA:** So music in school was particularly important. And then tell me what you did after high school.

**OM:** I attended A&T State University—it was A&T College then—for two years. Then I did a little stint in the army, and after that I came out, and somebody recognized that I was the one who started a swing band in high school, and introduced me to the late (Chap Allen?). And his nickname was Basie, because he used to play with Count Basie. And he had a combo that was going strong in the area, and I started out being a keyboard player, and eventually wound up being the star performer.

**CA:** Fantastic. And where did you perform, geographically?

**OM:** *Everywhere.* All up and down in the east-coast area.

**CA:** Were you based here in Durham?

**OM:** Yeah. And we performed with *all* the recording artists, including the Temptations, the Four Tops, Tina Turner. We've been on stage with Millie Jackson, Wilson Pickett. All those major recording artists, we opened for them. The building out on Highway 55 called Canfields is a warehouse. It was then the first major nightclub in Durham, and all the recording artists came there. And we performed. That's how we got to know all of these major recording artists.

**CA:** Fantastic.

**OM:** And we were the opening band.

**CA:** Tell me the name of your group again?

**OM:** The Jammers.

**CA:** The Chalmers?

**OM:** Jammers. Jammers Combo.

**CA:** And how many people were in it?

**OM:** Let's see. Peter Joyner, for one. It was about eight. About eight people.

**CA:** Eight. Fantastic. That was in the late '50s, when you were in your twenties, thirties.

**OM:** Ah – (counts to himself). Yeah. And down through the '60s. Down through the civil rights movement.

**CA:** So what was it like being a black group, and touring, in terms of civil rights—hotels, motels?

**OM:** Wonderful, because, because of our music, we were accepted everywhere. Because of our music, they *loved* us.

**CA:** And so you could stay in—

**OM:** We didn't do a lot of staying overnight. We did a lot of traveling, but—

**CA:** Did you stay with friends, if you had to stay overnight?

**OM:** No.

**CA:** Or you just did gigs?

**OM:** We did gigs, and came home. If it required traveling half the night to get home, that's what we did. We didn't never—we never stayed anywhere overnight.

**CA:** And that was primarily because of the segregated practices?

**OM:** Partially. But the drivers—we had no problem with having drivers that would drive half the night to get us home. The only problem was—they had a problem with me on weekends, because I'm church-orientated, and I've always been, and I told them, "If we can't get home by Sunday morning, don't accept the gig, because I'm not going. Because I go to church."

**CA:** Have you always been a member of—

**OM:** No.

**CA:** Mt. Calvary?

**OM:** No, I grew up in this very community. I was born right up the street, on Cecil Street, which runs down by the law building. My grandmother lived on Martha Street, the next street over. My favorite aunt lived on George Street, where the two high-rise dorms are. Then when we moved, we moved on Fitzgerald Avenue, which is across and up the hill from Central, right behind Shirley Caesar. So this is my old community. So everybody in this community basically went to Old Mt. Zion, that old church up on the corner. And I was raised in that church. But when we moved to the county, if you remember, I wound up going to Community Baptist. That's where I was talking about the old building, with the knot holes in the floor, and all of that. That church. And then I eventually left that church and went to Mt. Calvary.

**CA:** And so you've been there—

**OM:** I've been there since 1986.

**CA:** Well, let's move to today's activities. Tell me how you got involved with the Civil Rights Workers Reunion, and what role you've been playing in the luncheons and the services.

**OM:** Well, I didn't get involved through my activities with the civil rights movement. I was somewhat—you might call it "jealous," because when the civil rights movement was going on, my brother was in the class with those first sit-in guys at A&T. My brother was classmates to

them. He wasn't one of them that went down there, but he was there in the first part of the movement.

**CA:** What's your brother's name?

**OM:** Frederick Marsh. He's an electronic engineer with Howard University now. And my sister was going to Fayetteville State. So they were involved in the civil rights movement, as students. I had already come through. So I just felt like I was left out, because my brother and sister were active through their schools. So the only thing that I could do was be supportive through my music. And when they locked up all those students on Chapel Hill Boulevard, where Howard Johnson used to be, and they were locking them up by the thousands--and they were students not only from North Carolina Central, they were from Duke and UNC, there were just as many white students as there were black who were involved in the movement—I was there that Sunday, when they ran out of police cars and had to solicit buses from the Trailway company, to load up the students. I was there.

**CA:** You witnessed it.

**OM:** Lottie Hayes—and this is ironic, it's so ironic—Lottie Hayes had not married her husband Hayes. She was a student at Durham Business College. Mrs. Hayes, her husband's mother, and father, ran a house that kept the girls, like a dormitory house away, and she was staying there. So was my first wife. And I had gone by that day, because I had a convertible and I wanted to show off. And I went by the house that day and was showing off my convertible, but I knew that there was a rally going on out, and I went by and I picked up my first wife, who was then a student, and we rode out to that rally. And I was amazed, when I got there, never seen so many people, a mass of people, just as many spectators as there were participants.

But it was very moving, the songs that they were singing were sung with such vigor and vitality, with such strength, and such confirmation in what they were doing. They sang with so much strength and power. And just as fast as one would run out of voice to sing, somebody else would pick it up. That's where I met Vivian McCoy. And she was carrying the crowd, carrying the crowd. And Vivian is active right now. She's still active. She was urging the kids, "Keep singing, keep on." And just as fast as they would lock them up, some more would go sit down in their spots on the hill. And that was right across from South Square. And that hill was covered, it was like ants, with students. And they would carry them off by the busloads. They filled up the jail. And you could hear them singing a song, "Over my head, I hear music in the air," all the way downtown, down to North Carolina Central's campus, you could hear that music traveling over the airwaves. You could hear the music from the courthouse downtown, all the way down, and you could hear it. And that music was so beautiful. You could hear it. And the harmony? Out of this world. That music was something. And it's true about the jailer, dying. The stress was too much for him.

**CA:** That's a story, isn't it?

**OM:** That is a true story.

**CA:** So did you join in and sing, or were—

**OM:** Oh, yes! That's how I did my part, because I wasn't a student. I was no longer a student. But I stood out there, and, as much as I could be a part, to sing and urge people on. Because my brother and sister were doing it, and they were in school. I had already gone.

**CA:** This was your part—



**OM:** But this was my part. And I knew a lot of the people who were—I knew a lot of the leaders. All the leaders, I knew. I knew Floyd McKissick, and I knew—now the names escape me, but all of the people who were pushing the movement.

**CA:** Right. And so, when—so you came to be part of the Civil Rights Workers Reunion—

**OM:** Because of my ability to play. Because I play, and I've been known all over Durham by playing. And—

**CA:** Lottie Hayes is the director of—

**OM:** Yeah, Lottie called me first, because we're friends. Like I said, her husband and her, and my wife and I, got married at the same time. Our children are the same age. So we go back very far.

**CA:** So you've been coming to these reunions for how many years, now?

**OM:** About four or five years.

**CA:** Okay. Since about '99, 2000.

**OM:** Yeah, and it's poignant with me, because I remember those terrible things, some of those terrible things that happened and they were involved in. I wasn't involved in them, but I knew about them. And of course, being part of the process, or part of the celebration, my mind is refreshed every year. Because I knew about the Royal Ice Cream Company. I worked at Kress's during the holidays, during the time. I worked down there in the cafeteria, where we were not allowed to eat.

I worked there. I used to wonder, when I was little, what was the difference between—why-come some people called white and some people black, because my family is not—well, you can say multi-racial, because my ancestors were Indians, and they married both races. And so all my daddy's people are light, and some of them whiter than white. And all my mother's

people are dark, because my great-grandmother was Guinea, from Guinea. So she was true, she said, “I’m true African. I’ve never been a slave.” She says, “I’m a Guinea woman.” So I had the two opposing color sides in my family. My mother raised us never to call, never to use color jokes, because we were a product of both.

So I had—my mother had no education, my father had none. Absolutely none. My mother had low education, but she was a self-taught businesswoman before she died, and she was a stickler for education. My daddy was a pusher as much as he knew. But she did not allow us to bring home Bs and Cs. And she made it important to me, she was important, made it very emphatic, when I was very little, “Never hold your head down when you’re talking to anybody. Look them straight in the eye. Speak clearly and pronounce words correctly.” And when I lived on Cecil Street, that was the end of the city limits, so that’s where the bus turned around. I used to get free rides all over town with the bus drivers, because they thought I was just an exceptional little colored boy, because I spoke with good diction, I spoke intelligently, I spoke without being afraid or holding my head down. And I used to get free rides all over town with the buses, because the bus-driver would turn around there. And they were coming just as fast as I could get off one bus, another driver would take me. And they made it clear with my mother, everything was going to be all right.

So I never really suffered. Personally, I never really suffered abuse. But I’ve seen it. I’ve seen it. I really got upset the day I was down there, doing my job—my first job was at Kress’s, and I was making twenty dollars and seventy-eight cents a week, and I thought I was rich—and the last thing I had to do was mop the floor before going home, and this elderly, she had gray hair, this white lady came out and ordered her some ice cream. And she was sitting at the booth. This was downstairs, because we had to stand up at a booth upstairs. And they had a

restaurant downstairs, and the white people could sit down there, but we couldn't. We had to stand up at this little counter and buy hot dogs, and eat standing right there. Right next to the white and colored-only water fountains. And I got so angry, because this woman asked me, couldn't I stop while she ate? And it was time for me to go home. And she was eating ice cream. And my job was to damp-mop the floor before leaving, and I was doing my job. It wasn't sloshing water, it was a damp mop. I was nowhere near her, but she, "Can't you"— And you know, I didn't have the ire, the gumption, that I have now, because I might have told her off, and I might have gotten in trouble. But I thought it was so narrow-minded of her. She was sitting there, on my time, eating ice cream, and just because she said so I was not supposed to mop the floor. And I was ready to go home. I was doing my job. So that's the only really bad thing that I consider to me.

**CA:** Discrimination.

**OM:** Yeah. That's the only time. Now, we never—I didn't never like the fact that we had to walk in that little screen door at the bus station, and that little dank room, and they had a big cafeteria right on the front. And you heard me tell about climbing those steps in the center, in the Carolina Theater.

**CA:** Tell that story again. That's a wonderful story.

**OM:** I performed on that stage.

**CA:** Now.

**OM:** Friday night, two nights ago. I performed on that stage as a performer, as a profound entertainer, of the very stage that we were discriminated upon being able to walk in that door downstairs. Because we used to have to climb the steps. And it was high. It seemed like an eternity getting to the top.

**CA:** Blacks could only sit in the balcony at the Carolina Theater.

**OM:** Only sit at-- And the Center Theater. And I found out when I went to A&T, it was the same way up there in the theaters. You had to go to the balcony. And I said, “This seems so unreal. Look like the white people would want to sit up high and put the black people down at the—“ But now, they had the nice cushioned seats downstairs. We had those hard seats up there to sit in. And when I stood on that stage to practice, I looked up, and it dawned upon me, “That’s where we used to sit.” And something just washed over me. It was very emotional for me, to say, “Here I am, standing on the stage where we were discriminated upon, coming in to watch, enjoy, movies. And I’m being paid accordingly. Paid accordingly.

**CA:** This generation, your generation, is the only generation to really experience the before—

**OM:** And the after. That’s true.

**CA:** All in one lifetime.

**OM:** That’s true.

**CA:** And so that your experiences, and the change of your attitudes from a young man to a mature older adult, is one of the reasons why we’re doing this project and study.

**OM:** What really bothers me is that the age under me, the thirties, and the forty-year-olds’, parents, don’t say—the children coming along now don’t know anything about civil rights movement. They know about it, but they have not been given any education on how the struggle was. Their attitude is, “Hooray for us. We have everything. We can do this and we can do that.” And they don’t realize, and their parents have not taken time to explain what a struggle-- so many people have lost their lives—that we might be able to enjoy the things that we enjoy. And they take it so lightly. My daughter was at one of these things. She sang two years ago.

**CA:** At this reunion?

**OM:** Mm-hmm. And I said, “(?)” “No. Well, it’s boring.” And it—oh, it angered me, and I had to realize, well, her mother had not said anything to her about it. And so I tried to tell her as much as possible how difficult it was for us as what we called “coloreds” back then. We don’t like that word now, we say “black,” even though we are every color in the rainbow. Because my relatives are not black. And I don’t think any blacks have total black families, just like no whites have total white families, because they’re mixed up with French, German, Italian, everything—you just cannot see it like we can see it, because of the pigmentation of our skin. But there’s nobody a total, now.

**CA:** Besides there are lots of other differences.

**OM:** Yes!

**CA:** I mean, differences that people can see, differences that they can’t see.

**OM:** Yeah. And that’s the one thing that bothered me more than anything else. Our young people today don’t know, and don’t care, about the struggle.

**CA:** Right now your job and position is to be teaching music in the different daycare centers in Durham.

**OM:** And I try to advocate as much as I can without creating a problem. Let the children know. Right now we’re going through civil rights. And my four-year-olds, they will tell you right now—“What did Mr. Marsh say about civil rights?” “Mr. Marsh says civil rights can be described like ice cream and burnt beans.” And I carry them through a scenario, with giving one child ice cream and one child burnt beans. And I will say, “Now, if one child has burnt beans and the other child has ice cream, what is it?” They say, “That’s not fair.” I say, “Not fair? Fairness has to do with civil rights, how well people are treated.” And they will repeat that, too, and they go home and tell their parents. They come back and tell them. I say, “You have to

think of burnt beans and ice cream.” And I said, “Civil rights has to do with people being treated fairly.”

And the other day I was explaining to them about being bound, and emotionally I became overcome. They didn't know it. But I had to get up, I took my belt off-- And I was at one of the daycare centers, and I had one of the teachers to stand up over me, and I took my belt off and I put it around my neck and drew it up tight. I said, “How many people have seen dogs in the backyard, chained to a chain six feet long?” They say, “Yes.” I say, “Now, that dog has to run around like that all his life, in one spot. He eats there, he drinks there, and he pee-pees there. How would you like to just lay in the same place you eat, the same place you pee-pee, the same place you sleep and eat?” No, nobody would like that. I said, “Well, that's the way slaves were.” I say, “Slaves were treated just like that. They couldn't get up, they couldn't go to bed, unless they were told. And how would you like your brother, or your mama, and sister—you go home, and your mother and daddy's up on a wagon, and they're taken away, and they leave you there with somebody else?” I say, “That's the way it was.” But I lay down on the floor, and I took that belt, and I put it around my neck, and I had the teacher to hoist me up and pull me around. And do you know, I became emotionally overcome? I didn't let them know it. And I just thought, “Oh, this had to be terrible.” And I don't know what made me create that scenario, but it gave the children an idea what it was like. Because I said, “Dr. King did not like this. He had a dream that everybody would be treated free, equal.” And I said, “Dr. King was a civil rights leader, and that's the song we're going to learn today.” And so, all three hundred of my children collectively sing, “Dr. King was a civil rights leader/He had a dream.” And I taught them about the song, “Oh, Freedom.” That's when I was laying on the ground with my neck tied up in the belt. I said, “Freedom is the act of being free.” I said, “Many slaves have been down,

And that's when I laid down, got on my knees, I had to lay the point. And I said, "And those slave (?), 'Lord, I want to be free. I want to be free.'" And the song says, "And before I'd be a slave"—and I lay down—"I'll be buried in my grave/And go home, and go home/And be free." I said, "Now, they're not talking about going home. They're talking about they'd rather die than be-- And when they die, they go to Heaven, and they would be free." But I got so upset with—I got so over-emotional, because, even though I was teaching, it got to me. This was last Wednesday. But I use it in every class, so they know what they're singing about. I told them about the song, "We shall not be moved/Like a tree planted by the water." I said, "Water, trees survive on water, and we're going to be like trees. We will not be moved. We're going to take our place in society. Just because someone opposes it—" I said, "It's not as bad as it used to be, but it used to be terrible." And I explained. I said, "You have experienced some good things now, but it's because many people have fought, and been beaten, and lost their lives, and lost their children, and lost their husbands and their wives, because they wanted better things for you. So I'm going to tell you what your parents don't." I said, "Your parents don't like it, tell them to come see me. Tell them to come, because I got a message for them."

So I'm on the bandwagon for parents telling their children, at least instill it, whether they come to the meetings or come to the celebration, at least they need to know. These kids standing on the block with these dreadlocks in their hair, and don't even know what the dreadlocks mean. Dreadlocks is a form of religion in the islands. Rastafarians. Not one you see on the corner knows what that means. All they want to do is twist up their hair and-- (Pounds table) Noses, rings in their ear, is a form of slavery. Slaves used to have to wear rings in their ears, and in their noses, and here we put them all over our bodies, and our eyelids. And dropping their pants down

below their-- It's disgusting to me, and I thank God that all my sons are grown, and I didn't live through that, because I'd probably be in trouble.

**CA:** When you say that you were in Durham in the 1960s, when your brother and your sister were in school—

**OM:** Greensboro and Fayetteville.

**CA:** And are there other brothers and sisters?

**OM:** No, that's—well, we have a half-sister, older.

**CA:** Did you think at that point that there would be changes that you've seen subsequently, or did you—when was it that you knew that maybe things would change for good?

**OM:** Well, down through the years, things—like they said, that when the guys picked up—he mentioned today about all them newspapers said segregation has been considered unconstitutional—when you saw things like that, and you knew then it wasn't just (pounds table), it would be gradual. But you knew that that was a step in the right direction. So you couldn't actually see changes. They developed unconsciously. You look around, all of the sudden, you said, "Oh, it has happened." You can't see it happening, but it's happening.

**CA:** When was the first time that you registered to vote?

**OM:** I don't remember. I was grown. I was old enough. But I think the first place I registered was at Stanford L. Warren. I think that's the first place I registered.

**CA:** In the '60s?

**OM:** Yeah—

**CA:** Probably—

**OM:** I'm sixty-five now. I forget easily. (Laughs)



**CA:** When your children were going through public education in Durham, you were completely in the segregated, African-American schools, the black schools.

**OM:** Ah, no.

**CA:** Tell us.

**OM:** My son, my oldest son, the one on the police force, best friend was Nello Teer the third or the fourth—Nello Teer the fourth. And he did not know the schools, the schools integrated. Pearsontown was out there, on Barbary Rd. See, I told you Pearsontown started right up here on Fayetteville Rd.

**CA:** You were in segregated schools, but your children were not.

**OM:** My children were not.

**CA:** When did they graduate from—let's see, '37, we can work that out. But your sons went to Pearsontown.

**OM:** Yeah, my first three children went to Pearsontown.

**CA:** And were integrated in Nello Teer.

**OM:** But I—my aunt and uncle, the Senecas, were servants—not slave-servants, but servants, in-house servants--to the Teer family through three generations: Nello Teer, Nello Teer, Jr., and Nello Teer, III. And they were like family to them, because they lived on the premises. And when we went to visit as children, I thought that was their house, because that's where we went to visit them. Because they lived in the house. And we played with the Teer children and didn't know—I didn't know the difference then, because I was too young to know that there was a difference. Because when we went there, we played with them. Out on Roxboro Rd., at the old Teer house. I remember that. We played—they had an apartment up over the garage. But we'd play out in the yard with the Teer children.

But the thing that shocked me was, my son would always come home talking about his friend Nello, and he never called a last name. He'd always say "Nello." And he'd talk, "Nello this," and "Nello that," "My friend Nello." He and Nello were real close. And then one particular day, he said, "Daddy? Nello wants to know if I can come and visit him." So I said, "I'm sure it shouldn't be no problem, but we need to talk to his parents, because, before you can go visit somebody, I need to find out if it's all right if you come visit him, and they need to know how I feel." And I said, "Who is this friend?" And he said, "Nello Teer, IV." I said, "Nello *who*?" He said, "Nello Teer, IV." I said, "Son, do you know that your great-great-aunt and -uncle worked for the Teers through three generations of their family?" I forgot what happened. We never did make contact, because they would have known me, because they knew that I was Julia and Winston's nephew—and I was their favorite nephew, because I'm the one that played the piano, was always in church, so they talked about me.

But I got to know them when my aunt and uncle died, because they died within a year of each other, they were both in their nineties. And all the Teer family came to the funeral. They came and they brought, they gave gifts, money gifts, and many things. All the Teers, they turned out, because that was their family. Julia and Winston were their family.

But my children never had a chance to-- So then my wife, first wife, and I divorced, and the children went back to live in Monroe. When they went to school down there in Monroe, in Union County, they had then integrated. So they've never really suffered. And then my daughter married a white guy—much to my grief, and not because he was white, but because the problems I felt that they would face. And I told him so. I told him, I said, "Danny, I don't dislike you. Matter of fact, I hold you in high respect, because you have married a black woman with two black children, neither one of them yours, and all of you all are down there in that

rednecks area where you live.” I said, “You are a strong individual, and I admire you. But I don’t like the situation, because of what may happen to not only my daughter and her children, but you too.”

**CA:** When did they get married?

**OM:** I can’t remember the year. But they stayed married for a while, and they eventually broke up. They didn’t have a negative break, they just drifted apart. I understand that one of his brothers was half-black. I didn’t see him, but I heard. My daughter let me know. They were what you call lower-class whites. But then, down there in Union County, you got a lot of that.

**CA:** So your daughter still lives there?

**OM:** Yeah, but she just recently married, last year. And now she’s in the church, and active. Both her daughters are with my ex-wife, down in the county. She’s living in the city with her new husband. But they never really—I didn’t—we didn’t have any problems with the fact that—I just didn’t like the fact that, I didn’t like my granddaughters crawling up in his lap, because they were not his. And that just—that just went into molestation. All I could think was “molestation.” Now, maybe that was prejudiced of me—because you got black prejudices too. But I just had a prejudice about that. I just, like I said, I told him I admired him. But they eventually broke up.

**CA:** But you could see the difference between the individual and the prejudices society had about a biracial marriage.

**OM:** Yeah. Yes.

**CA:** And that’s being honest. That’s being honest. So they could have made a movie about your family as well.

**OM:** They could have. My youngest son, who used to give him a hard time, eventually married a white girl. And she has a biracial child, which is not his, but he is the only father that she knows. And that was down there too.

**CA:** Well, you must be a role model to folks in your family. Who's a role model to you?

**OM:** All I can really say, my mother and father were role models to me, because they had such a hard time. I'd hear them tell the stories of the terrible times they had growing up. I told my brother, I said, "You know, we are a dysfunctional family." And we laugh about it. Because we all became what our parents wanted us to be. We became educated, we became—what's the word—I guess independent, in a sense. We became—my dad always said, "Be somebody." We're not stuck up, but we became somebody to be reckoned with, as an individual.

**CA:** You're proud of yourself.

**OM:** Ah, yes, I am. I am. I'm the product of a totally illiterate father, and a fourth-grade-educated mother who, from sunup to sundown, pedaled that sewing machine, determined that we would go to high school and college, determined that we would be able to stand flat-footed and stand on our own feet, and not have to beg, determined to have some pride in ourselves and our heritage, because of our daddy, who had no education at all. He couldn't even write his name. No, he could only write his name, and he wrote that with a little "o," "o-r-e-n m-a-r-s-h." That's all he could do.

**CA:** So you're named after him.

**OM:** Yes. And he could count, and he could do anything with his hands. *Anything* he saw done. He could do brick-making, he could do plumbing, he could do electrical work, he could do building, he could do cement finishing, he was a gardener. He could do anything he saw anybody do, but he had no education.

**CA:** Well, he had education in life.

**OM:** Mm-hmm. He called it mother wit. And that's the will of the mother that the child survive. It's—my mother was the oldest of the girls at home. She had one brother, and their brother was favored by my grandmother, so he was free to do what he wanted to do, and my mother was pulled out of school. They treated her like a boy, to help raise her sisters, because my grandmother was a migrant worker. And she had to come out of school in the fourth grade.

**CA:** Your mother did.

**OM:** She cut wood, she plowed, she did the work that my uncle should have done. But she worked for many years in the homes of white people, and she would see white kids going to school. She went to Ohio with a family. They lived by the campus, and she'd see boys carrying the books of the girls on the campus. And I remember her saying that so many times, she said, "My children are going to go to college if it takes my last dying day."

**CA:** And all three did.

**OM:** And my mother pumped that sewing machine. In the morning we'd hear it humming. At night when we'd go to bed, we'd hear it humming. Daddy would work sunup to sundown. We hardly ever saw him, because when he came in the evening, he'd go straight to the fields, and as soon as the sun'd go down, he would be in the bed. He was very country. And when the sun came up in the morning, he'd be gone. So we never saw him, except when he'd come in. We would say, "Hey, Daddy," he would pat us on the head, and that was it.

**CA:** So he worked the fields when you moved to the county, he worked the shipyard during the war, and did he work—

**OM:** A regular job?

**CA:** --jobs in Durham after the war?

**OM:** Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. He worked in the tobacco factories, he worked in the cement finishing companies, and stuff like that. But my mother always sewed. My mother made the gown for Terry Sanford's wife, for the inauguration. She was that good.

**CA:** Wow. That is pretty good. That's pretty good.

**OM:** She did a lot of work for—who is that, Ruth Gordon? Downtown. Used to be Ruth Gordon. I think her name was Ruth Gordon. She had a shop. She did a lot of work for her. So my mother would be considered a professional seamstress. She was in the aura of a professional seamstress. She was good. She could make—she made shoes, she made hats. She was very gifted with her hands, and crafts.

**CA:** And she was a church woman. Do you remember the hats that she wore to church?

**OM:** Oh, she didn't wear that many hats herself, but she made hats to other people. She went without a lot, because of doing things for other folks.

**CA:** Your brother and your sister, are they still living, and what have they done with their lives?

**OM:** My brother became an electronic engineer. He's still at the staff at Howard University. And he does government projects. My sister is a retired civil magistrate. When she graduated, she taught school for a short time, then she worked at North Carolina Mutual, and then eventually, when she got married—I don't remember when she got into the—she became a court clerk, and from court clerk she went to magistrate, and from magistrate to civil magistrate. Now she's retired, and she lives in Richmond, Virginia.

**CA:** Interesting. So when you have a family reunion, it must be a lot of stories that you can tell, and a lot of changes that have happened between your parents and your children.

**OM:** I'm saddened by the fact that we are geographically separated, and we don't get together that often. And my mother just died year before last. So it has been very spaced-out since then. When Mother was here and Daddy was here, see, everything revolved around Mother's Day, Father's Day, Christmas, Easter, Thanksgiving—everybody'd be home. But now—

**CA:** Where did your parents live in these later years?

**OM:** Right out there by Pearsonstown School, across from Berea Baptist Church.

**CA:** And so that would be the family gathering area.

**OM:** That would have been. It's no longer that.

**CA:** Until they passed away.

**OM:** Ah-huh. My father and my mother died with Alzheimer's. So we don't get together anymore, and that's sad. We had—my brother and sister and I grew up as friends. We were not just brothers and sisters, we were friends. We were buddies.

**CA:** And so you helped each other out.

**OM:** Oh, we had each other's back. We got in trouble together. When I say trouble, I mean mischief. Everything we did together. We were very close. And now we're so distant. It hurts.

**CA:** So when you come to the reunion, you play music at the lunch, the way I heard you today.

**OM:** Always.

**CA:** You invite folks like Beulah Mason to come up and—

**OM:** Yeah, because I got Beulah to come the first time. Well, Beulah was coming, but I got her to start performing, because I knew Beulah could sing. She used to sing in the choir up the street at Mt. Zion, when I was playing there. I played there thirty years.

**CA:** You played at Mt. Zion?

**OM:** Thirty years.

**CA:** As the organist?

**OM:** Yeah.

**CA:** Great. Great. So you've been at a lot of churches in Durham.

**OM:** A lot. A lot.

**CA:** A lot. And so do you plan what you're going to play?

**OM:** No, I'm strictly, simply, spontaneous. Today I didn't plan what I was going to do.

**CA:** You just sat down at the piano and provided music while everybody was eating.

**OM:** That's the best way to do. Now, if you know you got to go play for people, then it's good to have a plan to go by. But like in there, I didn't plan that.

**CA:** So you were also playing at the service, as the people were coming in, before the service formally started.

**OM:** Yeah, I don't never sit down and plan what I'm going to do.

**CA:** That was great.

**OM:** And I didn't play any solos either.

**CA:** So it was a series of church music, gospel music, music that was just part of your community, your soul, your life.

**OM:** Right.

**CA:** Were there any organizations besides the churches that were involved in civil rights activities, that you were involved with?

**OM:** That I was involved with. None.

**CA:** The churches in Durham, did they organize parades, protests, that kind of thing?

**OM:** The churches didn't organize them, but they partook of them.



**CA:** So the Howard Johnson's is the march and the picketing that you remember the most.

**OM:** I remember that Howard Johnson incident. That was like unbelievable. That was like, "I'm watching a movie! This can't be." I remember the rallies they had at the post office, in front of the Durham Post Office. It'd be so many people out there. I heard about all the rallies that the students would be taking from Central, but that would be the time when I had to be at work. I wanted to be part of it, and I wanted so much to go to the March on Washington, when Dr. King spoke, but I couldn't afford to be away from work.

**CA:** Right. And work at that time was--?

**OM:** I'm trying to remember, where was I working then?

**CA:** In addition to being a musician, you've also had jobs—

**OM:** Oh, God, I've had all kinds of jobs.

**CA:** --as carpentry—

**OM:** I learned brick masonry in the army. I worked in construction jobs, then I worked in jobs where there were craft, because I've always been good at crafts. I've done a lot of craft work. I worked in picture frame shops, I worked in the poster shops, I worked in Garland Woodcraft. I worked as a plumber's assistant, and I just did that because I just wanted to have the knowledge, because I thought plumbing was the filthiest job that you could have. And it was an experience, because there's been some cold days under the house, and on top of the house. And then we worked in plumbing—and then we, you know, working with plumbing companies. But I wanted the experience.

**CA:** You wanted to make sure that the plumbing in your house worked.

**OM:** Well, yeah, that too. And it taught me a lot of things to do on my own, as a result of it. I learned to upholster from my mother and my brother, and I ran an upholstery shop for years, together. My mother taught us what she learned working at Durham Upholstery and—I can't think of the place downtown.

**CA:** Was it Durham Drapery?

**OM:** No, I worked at Durham Drapery for a long time too.

**CA:** Did you. Tell me about Durham Drapery.

**OM:** I loved my work at Durham Drapery. The only thing I disliked about that, they would not pay you when you were going to do overtime. And I had activities, other activities, as far as income, that I had to do. And I eventually left that. But I loved it, because when I worked—the relationship with the employees at Durham Drapery was like a family.

**CA:** Did you know Mary Holman?

**OM:** Yes!

**CA:** Tell me about you and Mary Holman, and others, integrating Durham Drapery.

**OM:** Well, when I got there, it was already integrated.

**CA:** Okay. She says she was the first black to work there.

**OM:** Oh really?

**CA:** Yes.

**OM:** Okay. That was before me. Because when I got there, it was just like everybody was a big family.

**CA:** Right. But the supervisors were still different.

**OM:** The supervisors were all white. And I remember, they had one black girl in the office, only one, that everybody looked at her and said, “She’s just a token. She’s there to satisfy the media. White people put her there so they wouldn’t have any flak from downtown.”

**CA:** So you were probably working there in the ‘70s, ‘80s?

**OM:** I can tell you how. I can tell you exactly. My youngest son is thirty-one, and he was born when I was working there.

**CA:** So that would be in the ‘70s.

**OM:** Mm-hmm.

**CA:** What do you remember about the boycott of the white businesses, the—Howard Clement?

**OM:** I—Howard Clement’s wife and I were classmates, and I knew his mother, I knew his parents, and I knew his in-laws.

**CA:** Kelly called it the black—just a minute—black solidarity movement.

**OM:** I remember hearing about it, but I wasn’t active in it.

**CA:** That was in ‘69, when they were boycotting white businesses.

**OM:** My participation was in providing music during-- My work, my participation in it was whenever they had big rallies and gathering, and music and choirs were needed. That’s where I came in.

**CA:** So you would help decide the songs.

**OM:** I didn’t have—yeah, well, you automatically knew what the songs would be, because they would be protests.

**CA:** And so then would you stand in front of the singers, or—

**OM:** Many times. And then most of the time, I played.

**CA:** Give them the direction.

**OM:** Mm-hmm.

**CA:** So if you were indoors, you had a piano.

**OM:** Always.

**CA:** If you were outdoors, what did you play?

**OM:** Well, we, blacks, as a tendency, know how to sing acapella.

**CA:** Exactly!

**OM:** So it was not a job for me. You saw how I got those kids, that choir, to sing behind-- I had never played for that choir. Most of the people I never knew. I just told them, "Sing." And they did. It looked like we planned it, but it wasn't.

**CA:** So they knew that you had the skills and the capabilities—

**OM:** Oh, yeah.

**CA:** --to do that. And you were interested in what was going on.

**OM:** Oh, yes.

**CA:** That is terrific. How do you think that Durham has changed since the time when you were growing up? What's the biggest change that you find, that you want your daughter to know?

**OM:** Ah, that things are better for her, as a black person, today, than it was when I was a child. That's the biggest change, is that things are much easier, *much* different. She does not have to deal with overt discrimination. That is the thing that I find that is most outstanding. Children today don't have to deal with overt-- We know that some of the time it still goes on. We know

about the stereotyping by the police. We know about stereotyping by jobs. We know that it still goes on, but it's not overt.

**CA:** But there're not rules that she has to live by, that you had to live by, like sitting in the back of the bus.

**OM:** No, it's absolutely-- Oh, no, absolutely not. My cousin's aunt, (Attorney?) Marsh— she's as white as you are. Whiter. His mother's sister—now, his mother is very light, but she has—she's a beautiful woman—you know that she's a light-skinned Negro. But her sister has all Caucasian features. And that was—it wasn't embarrassing. It's very funny, how she got on the bus one morning, and she started to the back, and the driver said, “Ah, no, ma'am. You stay up here.” And she put something on his plate. He said, “You come up here and stay up here, sit up here with your kind.” And she said, “If it wasn't for people like your kind mixing with people my kind, there wouldn't be no kind of my kind.” I'll never forget that.

**CA:** Well, you've given us a very good understanding of the way in which the color of your skin just doesn't indicate the beauty of your soul.

**OM:** No.

**CA:** And that's the way that we're hoping that the world for your daughter—

**OM:** That's the way it should be. That's the way it should be.

**CA:** --and the rest of the world will be.

**OM:** We know that the Samaritans did not like the Jews, in the Bible. But the Samaritans and the Jews looked alike to me, from what I gather, looked alike. But there was prejudices way back then. So prejudice has gone on since the beginning of time, and I suppose there will always be some form of prejudice. But we do not like that. We do not have to let it bog us down. Prejudices can be crossed over, they are barriers that can be broken. There can be crossovers

through Christ who strengthens us, through our provider, and through our maker, because He made all of us. He didn't make us as pie slices. He made us all. And I think it would be so boring if we all were the same. It would be utterly boring. I'm a black person who does not like chitterlings. I don't like baseball, and I don't like watermelons. I love opera. I like ballet. I like ice-skating. And I eat quiche. That's un-black. (Laughs)

**CA:** There aren't stereotypes.

**OM:** When I tell people that, and people look at me strange, I said, "None of us are alike."

**CA:** You're a great role model to the two-, three-, four-, and five-year-olds that you teach every day--

**OM:** Oh, yes. They are sponges.

**CA:** --out in the county. And tell me something. Do you think that the black history should be taught only in February, or all months a year?

**OM:** No. I think it should be taught year-round, along with all the rest of the histories, because there is so much that black children don't know, and has been suppressed by whites because they did not want—back then—they did not want children to know that blacks were just as intelligent, just as creative, just as spontaneous, just as strong, as the whites. They wanted us to look illiterate, they wanted to look like dumb imbeciles. When we know that education was going on in Timbuktu when white people were still in caves. We know that it has been, I don't now about proven, but it has been made a fact, stated a fact, that it's believed that the Garden of Eden was in Africa. After all, where did all those different animals come from? All those animals. That ought to be something that tell you something.

**CA:** Where did you learn so much about the history of the black people?

**OM:** I read. I *love* to read. I *love* to read. And it's as much of a fiction as it is, the Mandingo series tells you a lot. And there are nine or ten books. Most kids, "Have you ever heard of Mandingo?" "Oh, I heard of that. I saw that movie. That was a good movie." But they should read the book! And then should come along after that and read Drum, and then read Mandingo Master, and Flight to Falconhurst, and Heir to Falconhurst, and Falconhurst Fancy. All those books, they're *very* instructional. But nobody looks at it as just a good book to read. And it's fiction, but fiction is based on truth. And there's so much to be learned in-- That book should be put in the children's library. Now, it's got some heavy stuff in it, some sordid material and some things that you would not necessarily want your children to read, but the Mandingo series is really, really educational as far as slavery is concerned. It is the most—I think that's one of the most educated books.

**CA:** That is great to know from an educator's mouth, what your recommendation is, and what's out there.

**OM:** It is. And they don't write them in a-- Kyle Onstott—Lance Horner and Kyle Onstott-- Kyle Onstott and Lance Horner, and Ashley Carter, were those authors, and they wrote some *dynamite* stuff. I mean, it was-- Because it was like the real deal. They didn't cover up anything. And I often wonder--Ashley Carter and Kyle Onstott and Lance Horner were white. You could tell the one, Kyle Onstott, has a European derivative. But they didn't cut any corners.

**CA:** They tried to tell the truth.

**OM:** They wrote it like it was. God, that was just deep. And the average black person should read those books. But you can't even find them books anymore.

**CA:** That's an interesting recommendation.

**OM:** They need to be found and restored, because those books open up your eyes to a whole lot. We didn't, I didn't know that there were two color codes. You always hear about a child of a black and white person is a mulatto. The child of a mulatto and a white person is a quadroon. The child of a white person and a quadroon is an octoroon. And it goes—that's one scale, but it never mentions about the child of a black person and a mulatto being a tierceron. And farther down, a (marrani). A tierceron and a (marrani?) and griffe. Now, I can't remember exactly which degree, but it tells so much degree of black blood mixed with mixed, so many degrees of white blood mixed with mixed. And how, in New Orleans especially, the color cast.

**CA:** And in Africa they deal with different racial mixes.

**OM:** Even in Africa.

**CA:** In many different ways. This has been fascinating. We're coming up to one hour, so I am going to suggest that we stop this conversation for today.

**OM:** Yeah, my wife, they're going to kill me. I should have carried their lunches two hours ago.

**CA:** Oh, I'm sorry.

**OM:** But I felt this was necessary.

**CA:** Thank you very much. We will get in touch with you. And thank you for the work that you do with children every day.

**OM:** Oh, I love it. I get tired. I get tired sometime, and I don't want to go. But when I walk in in the morning, and as soon as I walk up in the morning, walk through the door, their faces light up, say, "Good morning Mr. Marsh!" And there goes your whole tiredness out the window.

**CA:** That's absolutely true. Well, thank you so much.

**OM:** I hope I haven't bored you!



**CA:** Not at all. (Tape recorder runs a few seconds while **CA** and **OM** discuss paperwork.)

End of recording)