

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

Interviewee: Virginia Williams
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Place: Durham Public Library
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Equipment: SONY MZ-R700 Minidisk
Recorder
SONY ECM-MS907
Microphone

Tape: SONY MD-80 Tape

Date: October 4, 2003

Description of Interviewee:

Circumstances of the Interview:

Barbara Lau (BL): Today is Saturday, October 4th, 2003, and I'm here at the Durham Public Library in Durham, North Carolina. My name is Barbara Lau, and I'm working with Adam Gorod. And we are interviewing Miss Virginia Williams, and this is part of the Durham Civil Rights Heritage Project oral history project. So, you came today with some material, but also to tell us a particular story.

Virginia Williams (VW): Yeah. I came to Durham in 1956, and I started working at Duke Hospital somewhere toward the end of that year or the beginning of the next. I met a friend who lived at the Harriet Tubman branch YWCA on Umstead Street, and she was talking about how much fun it is there, and how she liked living there, so I moved there. And I had another friend who was working at the Mutual.

BL: How old were you when you moved here?

VW: Let's see (?), I was eighteen, nineteen – I think I was twenty, so I should have been twenty-one then.

BL: And where did you move from?

VW: I came from Northampton County – Seaboard, North Carolina. And when I moved at the Y, I found out that it was full of activities. There was always something going on. There was special dinners, special groups. I think the Durham Business and Professional Chain was meeting there at that time. *Everybody* was meeting there. So you met a lot of people. And there was one Sunday afternoon, we were leaving, going out, and these men came in, and they were coming to a meeting. The name of the organization was ACT – and I cannot remember what A-C-T stood for, but I just knew it was ACT. And this was a newly organized political group, and the main purpose for their meeting was to start some kind of demonstration there to break down some racial segregated barriers. That was the purpose of that. So they invited us to come, and we went and sit in.

And I think they met once a month, which would have been, I think, the third Sunday in each month. So after a few meetings there with them, they decided, "Well, we've met, we've talked, we need some action. The next time we meet," which would have been in June, "we're going to pick a place, we're going to that place, we're going to set down and demand service." So that would have been the third Sunday in June.

BL: Of what year?

VW: 1957. Ah, I think I looked at the picture, and I believe the date is the 23rd. But they've got, that's with the paper.

BL: The newspaper.

VW: Yeah. The article gives the date. So we went to the meeting that Sunday, and we sat around, and we named a number of places we could have gone. You could have named any place, almost, because all of them were segregated. But we finally came to agree on the Royal Ice Cream – it was called the Royal Ice Cream Bar – because it was located in the heart of a black community. And the way it was set up, white people entered the front door from the Dowd Street door, I think. I think that's what it was, the Dowd Street. Black folk had to enter from the parking lot. You'd go up a few steps, you'd go through the back door, and you'd stand and wait until after they had waited on all of the white customers. It was, you know, kind of like here. So you'd stand here. There was also a swinging door. I think the counter and the swinging door was all lined up here. So we would have to stand here and wait. Then when the waiter come, he would take our order, we'd get our food and go back out. You couldn't sit in there. There were booths in there, and I think there were tables too, but I know there were booths in there where white people could sit in – in the heart of a black community.

So we said, well, that would be the ideal place to go. It's hot, it's June, ice cream would be the – this would be another reason why we would go, to cool off with some ice cream. So we got in the car, and we went to the Royal Ice Cream Bar. And we parked in the parking lot, and we knew we were going to have to go in the back, up the steps, in the back door, because we weren't going to get in the front door. So up we went. But once we got there, knowing how the set-up was, and knowing there was a swinging door – I'm not sure, I can imagine Reverend Moore probably was leading the group – but once he pushed, once we got there and he pushed that door, we just never stopped to place an order. We just went in, set down, and occupied – there were eight of us, so we must have occupied four booths. We occupied – we all sat down. And the waiter came and asked us to leave, and we refused to leave. And actually, I don't remember a waiter coming to our booth, but I'm sure they knew Reverend Moore, so they were trying to get . . . Then it seems like the main thing they were trying to do was to get *us* to leave, because they figured if we leave, they'd just take him to jail anyhow. But they kept asking us to leave, and we kept asking for ice cream. Asking to leave, and we kept attempting to place the order. And as far – I can't remember the manager actually coming over to ask us to leave. I

think in the testament, in the trial, I believe he said that he went over, but he didn't ask us to leave. It was always the--

So after they found we weren't going to leave, they apparently called the police. By that time, there was a lot of little black kids who had been – this was what they did on Sundays. They'd come in and get ice cream. But when they came and saw us sitting in there, they were just peeking through windows. (Laughs) And you know every one of them was colored. Because they could not believe it. And I think perhaps somebody called the press. I don't know who called who, because we were still trying to get ice cream, but I know somebody called the police. That I do know.

So they came. They asked us to leave and we wouldn't leave. Finally the decision was made that they were going to take us to jail. So we got out there, and they said, "Well, we will allow the three women to ride together." We got in the cars and went down there. There were bailsmen down there. So they were in the process of – they fingerprinted us. You weren't taken pictures at that time, that I recall. I don't even know whether they weighed us or not. But anyhow, just at the end of it, just as the bails-bondsmen had paid out on all of our bonds, there was this man in there, and he was mumbling to himself. And I said, "Who is that?" They said, "That's Lewis Austin. He's the one who owns the Carolina Times." Somehow he found out, and he got down there, and he was mumbling, "I wish I could have gotten in here to get them all out!" (laughing)

But I didn't know who he was, because, like I said, I'd just *got* to Durham, so I didn't know any of the players!

Well, we were told that we were going to have to go to – they didn't lock us up, because they got us out. The trial was going to be that Monday morning, I think. All right, so we went to – the president of ACT was David Stith. And he was running Southeastern or Southwestern Business College. It was located upstairs on Pettigrew Street. So we went up there to plan the strategy, and they were going to contact the lawyers. And they found out attorney Conrad Pearson was in New York, so they contacted attorney William A. Morris, Jr., and I think M. U. Thompson, McKissick. Anyway, I was told that we're going to have to try to get the case continued – you know, put off, instead of Monday – because they wanted Conrad Pearson from New York back here to handle it. And the judge said that Monday morning, "No, I'm calling that case today." So they had about an hour to come to Duke – I was working at Duke – get me

off the job -- and I'm thinking, "I know this is it now!" -- and get to court. But we did. And of course, the judge, they found us guilty, of trespassing at the Royal Ice Cream place.

BL: Let me ask you a couple more questions.

VW: All right.

BL: Just to back up a little bit.

VW: All right.

BL: Can you remember who the other people were, the other seven people that were --

VW: Oh, I do. I do. Len and those have that information.

BL: In the article?

VW: Yeah. Reverend Douglas Moore, Jesse Gray, Claude Glenn, Willis -- I'm not sure whether his last name was Carroll Willis, but his last name was Willis -- Mary Clyburn, Vivian Jones, and Virginia Williams. That was the seven.

BL: So you knew the other girls that were in the group?

VW: We were friends. Yeah. I knew them. Because, as I said, that's how I ended up moving to the Y. Mary Clyburn was staying at the Y. She and Vivian were good friends. Vivian was from Durham, so she was living on Madison Avenue. And the three, that put the three of us together, good friends. So I knew all of them.

BL: Well, were you interested in this kind of activity before you moved to Durham?

VW: I was. I was always interested in it. I came from a little, small town. It was a little community called Concord, about three miles from Seaboard. And out there I was aware of the NAACP, because, usually on Sundays, my father -- well, we would always go to church. You went to school weekdays, you work hard in the field -- cotton, corn, peanuts -- and then on Sunday evenings after church, we would always go visit the neighbors. But one Sunday out of the -- I don't even think they met every month, the NAACP. But when they met, that was the Sunday he would get dressed, and he'd go off and leave us, you know. "Why is he not taking us? Where's he going dressed up?" So my mother said, "He's going to the NAACP meeting." But it was nothing that was talked about. I mean, you didn't just run around talking about, "We've got an NAACP meeting," in Northampton County at that time! You're talking '50s, '40s.

So I was aware of how strongly he felt about it. And also, when the -- when the Brown versus --

BL: Board of Education?

VW: Yeah, uh-huh. –in Kansas happened, that happened in '54 – I was still in high school. And a group of us said, “We’re going to go over to Seaboard High School.” That was the white high school. But that morning we was supposed to go, everybody backed out. Nobody was going. And of course, I wasn’t going by myself. So I had always wanted to get into something like this. That’s one of the reasons why, when ACT said what they were going to do – “We’re going to act, we’re not going to just talk.” – I was, you know, I was interested.

BL: So when you went in there, and, you know, you went in the back door, and then you just kept on going, how did that feel?

VW: I guess it was exciting. It was exciting, because we went where we dared not to go. And they didn’t try to stop us – because it happened so fast. He looks around, and the place was empty, (laughs) and suddenly the booths are all occupied. And as I recall, some white people did come in the front door. But it seems to me like – and I talked to a few people about it – when they came in and found the booths occupied, they just left. So (laughs) there we were. We had range of the whole side over there.

But I wasn’t frightening or anything of that sort. Because either way, we could have made history. If he had served us ice cream, *he* would have made history. But, by refusing to, I guess *we* made history! So either way, there was going to be history made there.

BL: Sounds like the group was kind of conscious of that, like people knew that that was part of it, was making history.

VW: Yeah, I think all of the ones who were in the organization -- Like I said, we just wandered up in there and got invited. And we had not – I’m sure that was at least the third meeting that I had been to, that we had been to. So we just went along with it. “Yeah, we’re going to go.”

BL: So you were twenty. Were the other people in the group, with the exception of Reverend Moore, around your age, or were they different –

VW: They were, they should have been older. All of us girls were about the same age, because I had graduated from high school in '55, and they graduated, I think, in '56 – because I came up here '56, and they were just graduating. So we were all either 20, 21, or -- no more than 22. Something like that. All of us were the same age.

BL: But the men were older? Or were they also young—

VW: I'm sure, because Reverend Moore had finished college, he had gone to – he had worked some, he was the pastor of a church – I think all of them were working somewhere. So they had to be older. It was an older group of men.

BL: Did that make you – were you afraid at all that, the idea that maybe, if you'd get arrested, it would affect your job, or the rest of your life?

VW: Let me tell you something. I didn't think about it. I don't know, I wasn't thinking about it that Sunday. But that Monday, when they came on my job -- But the thing about it was, it blew up kind of quickly, because it was in the morning's paper, and when it blew up – and I'm going on to work, not even worried, you know, because they're going to get it put off and so on. And they said, "You've got to go." So I went to the manager, and I told him, I said, "Something came up, and I have to leave right away." (Laughs) Knowing she'd already read it. She says, "All right. Well, call me if you can't come tomorrow." "Call if I can't come tomorrow? That doesn't sound half bad!"

So we went on, and, of course, the next day I went back to work. They never said anything to me about it. One of them, the manager – see, I worked in food service. The manager's name was Mrs. Craine. Barbara Craine. The assistant manager was something Malone. And Malone was from Alabama, and I'm thinking, "I know I've gone now." They never said anything to me about it.

And you know, from the time you go to, at that time, Recorder's Court, to Superior Court, it's months, maybe almost a year, when it finally came to Superior Court. Because we appealed and asked for a trial by jury. And when it came time to go then, I asked for time off because of that. "Okay." And I think that was two days, I think. They never said anything about that.

BL: So did you get a sense that maybe they thought what you did was okay?

VW: I felt like they didn't think it was bad. That is the way I felt. Because – I can't say, at that time, they really could have fired me, because I didn't give notice that I was going to have to leave that Monday morning. I just said, "I got to go." And I didn't tell them why, although I knew they knew why. And then when the trial came -- So I think they thought it was not really bad.

BL: What about other people? Other friends of yours, maybe who were African American, or other people, you know? Did other people make comments to you about what you had chosen to do?

VW: They didn't make comments to me. A lot of black folks were, you know, "These are trouble-makers." Most of us were really not from Durham. I was from out of town. Doug Moore was not from here. Claude Glenn was not from here. I mean, Willis was, Vivian was. Mary wasn't. Most of us were-- So we were, to some of the blacks, trouble-makers from out of town. Yeah. "Everything's doing fine, here they come stirring up stuff." I never heard anybody say it, but friends of mine said friends of theirs said it. And a real good friend of mine said her mother was -- oh, she was just, you know, all up in arms, "All these young folks," and the thing about it, "You've got to be, you're friends with them." You know. So you know, yeah, that was the idea. I think they thought -- I don't know what they thought. (laughs) I guess I wasn't thinking that much about it, long as I was able to stay out of jail. (Laughs)

BL: Well, did you stay active with ACT, and engage in other activities?

VW: Well, actually, ACT kind of broke up after then. The reason was, see, a lot of those people were from out of town. They was here working. The secretary was working at NCCU. David Stith had his business at -- Ah, there was another one. A lot of the supporters who were supporting it -- there were a lot of members of it, there were several members --but most of them were business-people. So it kind of broke up after then. But once it broke up, I became a regular at the Durham Committee on the Affairs of Black People, the NAACP, and, you know--

BL: What about your family? I would guess that the newspapers --

VW: My father was, well, I think it took a week or two for the news to get down there. Somebody read it and told them that I had come up here and gotten cussed out. And it was, (laughs), you know. So, I mean, my father was extremely proud. He said, "You did what was right." And this was a man slip and go to the NAACP meeting. My mother was hush-hush. She didn't want to talk about it, she didn't want to-- To her, me being -- going to jail -- I think, was what she couldn't get over. None of the others had gone to jail, and here I was, and I am the youngest. And here she goes off and gets arrested! I think to her going to jail meant a bad name for the family, bad name. She wasn't looking at *why* I went. It's just the point that she went. And then she was listening to what folks were saying down there, too. So.

BL: How do you think that being involved in that changed your life? Or did it?

VW: Well, I'm sure it changed it, but I think it just reinforced what I did believe in, that as Ossie Davis said at a meeting that I was in, that everybody has a right to the trough. (Laughs) I'm just another pig that needs to be at the trough. So I think it just reinforced what I felt.

BL: When you think about Durham now – because I know you don't have a lot of time, and we've already been talking for almost twenty minutes – do you think Durham has changed since then, or not changed? Or in what ways that you notice any difference?

VW: Well, physically, I mean, when you're looking at it, you know it has changed. There are no white-only fountains or none of that. All of that is wiped away. We can go basically where you want to go. If you got the money, you attend certain things. I still think that, when it comes to big decisions being made, a lot of them are being made on golf courses where most of us are not, and, you know, things of that sort. We've come a long way, and I want to say that. But we just don't need to sit back and say, "We've got it made now." So it has changed.

BL: Now, you said there was another story that you were going to tell us, but you're going to wait when you come back, or do you want to give us a hint to what that might be?

VW: Well, I'm going to tell you what it was, but I don't have any information. To get this I had to go from this scrapbook to that scrapbook, because, what happens, every time somebody interview me, I give them the stuff and never get it back.

BL: I'm sorry to hear that.

VW: That's how the original-- Now, this is one picture that I didn't pull out. This was an original picture, but it doesn't have the whole group. And I think (rustling papers)-- I know where this one was taken. This one was taken -- And I think I gave them that. (Rustling) Maybe I did give it to them.

BL: You gave them one of your pictures?

VW: Oh, now. This was an original. This was taken at the church where he was the pastor of. He was serving us Holy Communion. But it doesn't have Jesse Gray there, and apparently Jesse Gray had not arrived.

BL: So tell me who's in this picture.

VW: That's Reverend Douglas Moore. That's Mary Clyburn, who is now living in East Orange, New Jersey. I talk to her all the time. Matter of fact, talked to her a couple Sundays ago. That was Claude Glenn. The last we heard from him, I think he contacted attorney William A. Morris, Jr., who was one of the attorneys, trying to get some kind of résumé. He was running

for judge somewhere. I don't know whether they said Milwaukee, or where. And that's me. He died.

BL: And what's his name?

VW: Willis. He died maybe three years ago. At least two years ago. She died years ago. So, yeah. So the only ones living now --

BL: And what's her name?

VW: Vivian Jones. Vivian is -- she is from Durham. Now, she was from Durham. She worked at North Carolina Mutual.

BL: And who took this picture, do you know? Was it like a newspaper person, or -- I mean, did they pose it, or were you guys just there?

VW: No, this was posed for, I'm sure, because here he was -- you can't see it, but he was serving -- they look like a lot of little glasses -- he was serving Communion for us. And this, I think, was taken -- I'm trying to look at the clothes. That must have been taken the Sunday before we went to Superior Court trial, I think. And I can't remember why Jesse Gray was not there. I can't believe Jesse would have been taking the picture, because somebody else would have taken-- I don't know. But that's the reason why I didn't submit it, is because it does not include Jesse Gray.

BL: But would it be okay for us to make a copy of this --

VW: Yeah, if you can straighten out the other men!

BL: No, it's no problem. And you'll walk away with it.

VW: Yeah, if you can --

BL: But do you know where, what church was this?

VW: Yeah, I know where the church was. It was in Asbury Temple Methodist Church. It's still standing. It's on -- let's see, you cross Alston Avenue, and that's Lawson crosses Alston Avenue. It's on Lawson Street, (second from the end?). I think the name is changed.

BL: Was this his church?

VW: He was the pastor of that church at that time. I think the name is changed now, but it's still some kind of Methodist. It was then Asbury Temple Methodist. I think it's now some United Methodist.

BL: Okay. But it's right near Lawson and Alston?

VW: Yeah. After you cross Alston and you go on Lawson, it's the one that's sitting right up on the hill. It's the little church on the hill.

BL: (Asks someone to make a scan of photograph)

VW: I also – well, this is one I'm not going today. I'm going to do this one either at -- There was a silent march. I'm trying to remember which decision the United States Supreme Court made that the NAACP came out against. So all over the United States, the NAACP organized this. It was going to be a silent march. We would just have all kinds of signs. The signs would carry the message. But when we walked past the United States Supreme Court building – that was going to be on our right – we would turn our heads, and just silently march by. And I didn't see it, because I was participating, but that Sunday I went to church, and everybody said, they said all you could hear was [makes noise of footsteps]. Nobody saying a word. And they couldn't figure out, how could I keep my mouth shut, much as I like to talk? But that's what it was. And these are pictures of people who participated. That's City Councilman Howard Clement. That's Cora McFadden, who's also on the City Council. That's me. She was the president of the local branch of the NAACP.

BL: And her name was--?

VW: Florine Robinson. And I meant to call her to see if she has any information on that.

BL: And do you know what year this was, or approximately?

VW: That's what I'm going-- I've got, they gave us articles, larger than those things there, and it lists all, it was about ten reasons why we marched. And it's somewhere in an envelope. But I'm going to find it, and I'll bring this one to either Hayti Heritage or St. Joe. Yeah, one of the others. And this was, I had evidently gone to the trashcan and was walking back. But see, these were what the signs, some of the signs – they said all different kind – but the point was, we let the signs do the talking, and we would not acknowledge the Supreme Court. That was the point of it. Actually, it was to walk past them and pretend that it did not exist. So that one I'll bring up later.

BL: Well, let me just ask you one more question.

VW: Okay!

BL: You know, you were saying that being involved in the Royal Ice Cream sit-in sort of really changed certain things that you did. I'm curious just sort of how that made your everyday life different. You know, after doing that – because it was obviously a courageous kind of move,

to do that and to be involved in that, and especially because there were only two other women with you – I mean, you never know what’s going to happen if you get arrested by the police. I mean, that’s true even today. Did it make you feel different every day? Did it make you feel –

VW: Not every day. But it was when certain things would come up, when certain incidents would come up, you know. You’d think, “Here we are again. Here we go again.” Because after this – this was in ’57. Now, you had the big sit-in at A&T in – what was that, ’62? Or was it ’60? Whenever it was. And that is what really caught fire. Now, this got a lot of publicity in the state, state-wise, and some people from Virginia. You know, a little bit, but not like the A&T thing, because that was like a wildfire. It hit this campus, and went everywhere. But when they had the demonstrations here, I participated in a lot of them also. The Carolina Theater, Howard Johnson’s out on the Boulevard. I was at most of those, because a lot of them took place Sunday afternoons, you know. Everybody working during the week. So most of the Sunday-afternoon activities, like out at Howard Johnson. We went out there, and I can remember, Mickey Michaux was out there, and he was saying, “Take handkerchiefs, because they might turn loose gas,” or something like that. You know, try to prepare us for it. So I participated in a lot of that. I did a lot of picketing at different places.

And a lot of the Duke students joined us, because I can remember picketing at Eckerd’s, out there at the Eckerd’s, and all of them were Duke students except me. All of us were Duke students. And so.

BL: Were there people that were kind of your role models? Especially were there any other women that were your role models, that were leaders, or did you choose to be in the leadership role?

VW: No, I never wanted to be a leader. I want to follow good leaders. And even today, I’ve never wanted to hold any office or anything. I just like to support the leaders. But there was a lady -- and she’s still living now, and I know that you all are going to come up with something on her – her last name is Turner. I think she is still living now. She was from North Durham over here. It seems like she worked at the factory. But she showed up everywhere. She showed up at all of the meetings that -- Now, during the demonstrations here, most of the meetings started at St. Joseph Church down there. Reverend Swann, I think, was pastor then, and Mayor (?) was the mayor here, I think. Because the night, one night I went down there, and, see, you’d leave there, and then they’d send some here to picket, some there. And when I got there, they

were sending all of us home, because there was bomb threats or something. And I remember (?) was there, and Reverend Swann was there, and it was, “Every man make, make sure every woman gets home safely.” And things like that. But I continued to, as long as there were the demonstrations there.

BL: Do you remember Mrs. Turner’s first name?

VW: No, but Kelly Bryant will know it. (Laughs) He will know it. And Mrs. McKissick, and all.

BL: Why did you admire her?

VW: Because they were people who, although they worked full-time jobs, but they rushed out to come, and sometime gave us food, food for the picketers and stuff like that. And you know, I thought, after you work there at a factory all day, or worked anywhere all day, you ready for bed now! We were younger. These were elderly folks then, and they would work all day, Ms. McKissick and all of them. They threw their house open for us, for meetings and all. So those were the people. Because, like I said, I hadn’t been here that long, so I didn’t know a whole lot of people at that time, and these were the ones I was seeing. I was seeing them. There were some more, I can’t remember the names of them. But basically, I looked at the women, the older women, who had their own families to go home and cook for, and who still found time to come here to do this. So they were definitely – some of them. Pratt Edwards, John Edwards’ father, he died last year, I think. He seemed to never get tired. These were people who never ran out of juice. Work all day, and a lot of them, I think, did work factories or whatever. But at night, when we were there, they were there helping us get a sign made or helping us do this or get that, some Nabs over there, whatever.

BL: Would it be okay if we wanted to call you to talk to you some more?

VW: Sure.

BL: I’ll try to look that up, the interview that you said you did for someone at the Center, so that we don’t necessarily –

VW: Well, I got the tape, so I can call you back, I can call you back tonight and tell you who it was. Because I’m sure – he sent me the tape, I’ve got the tape. And I ought to know his name, because –

BL: Was he a student?

VW: Actually, I really think he said something like UNC. It was something about UNC, I think. But I have that information at home.

BL: I know sometimes going over the same territory more than once—

VW: Let me write you.

BL: Okay. I'll give you my card and you can let me know. But thank you so much today for talking with us.

VW: You give me your card, and I can call you, because I got his tape there. I went out on, that was out on -- (End of recording)