

Interview
with
JOHN HOPE FRANKLIN

July 27, 1990

By John Egerton
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START OF TAPE 1, SIDE B

July 27, 1990

(SIDE A of this tape is part of an interview with Guy B. Johnson)

JOHN EGERTON: I know your historical, personal background, about your parents meeting at Walden. You know, we talked. . . .

JOHN HOPE FRANKLIN: At Roger Williams.

JE: At Roger Williams. We've talked about that before, and about how you got to Nashville from Oklahoma and all that. But I want to kind of pick up about the time when you were an undergraduate at Fisk in the '30s, and ask you first, well, a couple of things. One, do you recall any meeting, interracial meetings, that took place on the Vanderbilt campus during those years?

JHF: No.

JE: Never happened?

JHF: No, never happened so far as I know.

JE: At Fisk, yes, but at Vanderbilt, no?

JHF: That's right.

JE: The people from Vanderbilt would come over there, but not the other way around?

JHF: That's right. And I don't whether you remember the famous meeting--maybe then I would have to back up and say I know of one--where a number of people, distinguished sociologists, probably Robert Park, people like that. I'm not certain who they were. They had a meeting out at Vanderbilt and invited E. Franklin Frazier. It might even have been a luncheon. And I think Chancellor Kirkland learned about and simply blew his stack.

JE: This would have been in that period when you were an undergraduate.

JHF: Yes. It would have been because, you see, Frazier left at the end of my junior year. Went to Harvard in 1934. Other incidents that I remember in Nashville and at Vanderbilt was when, in my senior year, the spring of my senior year, I was an applicant for admission to Harvard to go to graduate school. This is before the GRE's, you see. So they wanted me to take a Scholastic Aptitude Test, and, of course, it was scheduled, like the GRE's, at a certain time and place. And it was at Vanderbilt, and it was in a certain room on Vanderbilt campus. I went there. I'll never forget--of course, I had never been on Vanderbilt campus before--I don't really quite remember how I got there. I don't think Ted Currier took me, my professor and my sponsor. But I got there and I got in the room, and this white professor--I don't need to say white, he was a professor at Vanderbilt--looked at me and he could not imagine what I was doing there. I said, well, I wanted to take the Scholastic Aptitude Test. He threw the test at me. I was usually quite comfortable in most situations, but I really was most uncomfortable [then]. I often wonder what I made on that test [laughter].

JE: You remember what his name was?

JHF: No, I never did know what his name was. I remember he had on a Phi Beta Kappa key. I saw that dangling down. I was familiar with that because Currier was, of course, Phi Beta Kappa. That's the only time. The other was what I heard about

Frazier going over to Vanderbilt. The other was what I experienced. Now, on the other side, of course, people came to Fisk all the time.

JE: Yeah, sure. There was Currier and there were others.

JHF: Oh, but I meant public affairs, concerts, lectures, everything--white people just came. And nobody felt anything about it. They just came and sat where they pleased. And you would be interested in this, John, in the fall of my senior year I was president of the Student Government. It was in either late October or early November that two things happened in Nashville that were really spectacular. One was that a young black was lynched, Cordie Cheek, who was lynched. He really was not a Fisk student.

JE: But he was right close to the campus.

JHF: He lived in a house, I think it was owned by Fisk as a matter of fact, one of those rentals. But he was taken off campus, out of town and lynched. Apparently for running over a white girl on his bicycle. Hitting her. And the students were up in arms and everything. All hell broke loose. Awful. And the other thing was--these things come together--the announcement of Franklin D. Roosevelt that on his way to Warm Springs, Georgia, he was going to stop in Nashville. He wanted to do two things in Nashville. He wanted to visit the Hermitage, and he wanted to visit Fisk and hear the Fisk choir sing. I was right in the middle of all of it. One, because of this protesting in behalf of his boy, and the other because, as the chairman of the Student Government, I had a real responsibility in connection

with the Secret Service and all the rest who were coming down. They came out and they had advance parties to see how everything was going. Instructed me what had to be done, and they were hoping I would interpret to the students. For example, no student could be upstairs in Jubilee Hall looking out the window because the President was going to come up around that oval there.

JE: And these two events happened contemporaneously?

JHF: Well, within weeks of each other. The Cordie Cheek lynching may be coming--you can check it--in October. The president came in early November. So we had these two things going. The curious thing about it is the Nashville citizens could not imagine that the President of the United States would come to Nashville to see a bunch of "niggers," you know [laughter]. I remember even the radio that morning, describing his tour of the city, did not include Fisk in it, although he had announced that he was coming to Fisk, and the people knew he was coming. We had made arrangements, the choir would be on the steps of Jubilee Hall. I have pictures of that. And there would be bleachers all around where citizens could come and sit and see the president when he and Mrs. Roosevelt came up around there. And as big man on the campus, I'm right around everything. I remember a white man coming up to me and he said, "Where do the white people sit?" "Oh, you sit anywhere. We don't have any special place for you to sit." He said, "You mean to tell me, we don't have any place where white people can sit and not black people?" I said, "No, no, no, we don't have, there's no

segregation at Fisk at all. Just make yourself at home." And he sounded, he was so upset, not angry with me, by the way, but upset. And he told me, as though I were his friend, he said, "You know, I have voted the Democratic ticket every time of every election since I was old enough to vote, but if the President of the United States comes here and speaks to a group of people and there's no special place for white people, I will never vote the Democratic ticket again." [Laughter]

JE: He just told you that?

JHF: Yeah. Like he thought I would understand. Like nobody else, you know, it was almost like we were in this together [laughter]. He said, "I'll never vote for the Democrats again."

JE: That was in '34?

JHF: November of '34.

JE: Then you went to Harvard and you came back in '36-'7, is that right, to teach?

JHF: Yes, I came back to teach.

JE: Can you recall any racially oriented incidents or contacts or anything through that time?

JHF: No, not any across town, the same kind of interracial events went on at Fisk all during this time.

JE: Still nothing going on at Vanderbilt?

JHF: No. When did the YMCA graduate school close?

JE: I'm not sure. I need to check on that.[it was 1936].

JHF: Yes, this is significant in this connection because when the YMCA graduate school closed, Tom Jones, president of

Fisk, bought a lot of the equipment and materials from the school, out of date, even mattresses and tables and chairs and things like that. And, what's his name, later president of. . .

JE: Harvey Branscome?

JHF: No, president of Berea.

JE: Hutchins?

JHF: He wrote a book on race relations, too. Weatherford.

JE: Yeah. W.D. Weatherford.

JHF: Weatherford came out to Fisk and taught, you see, when that place folded up. I don't know when this was, whether it was while I was still a student or whether I was already graduated. But I learned about it. The town was very incensed. People were very upset that this man would come. You know, it goes to show his colors, he was never straight. He must not ever have been straight. One, to write a book on race relations, which was a similar kind of statement, and two, to come over there and teach. I remember that, but I can't place the dates.

JE: Okay, let me move you just a little farther ahead. When we went to St. Augustine and taught, and then to Durham. You went to St. Augustine in '39 and stayed about four years, and then you came to Durham.

JHF: And stayed here four years.

JE: The time you were at St. Augustine was the time that the Southern Conference for Human Welfare met in Birmingham, 1938. Did you have any connection with any of that? Do you remember that?

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JHF: Well, I knew that they met there. I don't know, I would have to look up. I don't know how I'd find it. I joined the Southern Conference of Human Welfare and was a member, but I don't know when I joined.

JE: It subsequently had a meeting in Chattanooga and one in Nashville.

JHF: Yes, and we had one here. I must have been teaching at North Carolina College by this time in Durham because there was one at the Washington. . . I don't think it was a national meeting, maybe a North Carolina group. Maybe Frank Graham was there, I'm not sure. I got to know him in this general period. Very, very fond of him. But this group met at the Washington Duke Hotel, the old Washington Duke Hotel downtown. Everybody there was rip roaring, you know, egalitarians. I remember it got to be lunch time, and they tried to get us all in to have lunch in the Washington Duke Hotel in the dining room. Of course, they said "no you can't bring those people in here."

JE: Okay to meet but not to eat?

JHF: Yeah, they might not even, up to that point, I don't know whether they knew we were up there meeting as far as that's concerned, but certainly not to eat. So everybody got up in arms and furious, said, "Well, nobody will eat down there then." They went out somewhere and got food and brought it in, so we could all eat together. This is the period of people like Charlie Jones () over at Chapel Hill. He's now quite old. Have you met him?

JE: Yeah.

JHF: Then there was a group--I don't think it was the Southern Conference of Human Welfare--but there was a group, there was a Unitarian Church in Raleigh where there was a lot of interracial goings on, meetings, you know, and everything. They would have a big symposium every spring, and that's the first time I saw Lillian Smith. She spoke at the sort of closing night thing. There were a lot of blacks and whites at these meetings. I'm trying to think of the pastor of that church in Raleigh. But that was a very lively group, and so was the group, the North Carolina chapter of the Southern Conference for Welfare. I'll call it that for want of a better name. It was not the national group yet. They were very lively and active, but it wasn't large. Those meetings in Raleigh would draw a large number of people. The Southern Conference meetings, well, were working meetings. Trying to make some plans about how to approach this problem.

JE: Then there was a meeting here in October of '42, a group of blacks, to plan, to write what call to be called the "Durham Statement." It was sort of a

JHF: Was it in '42?

JE: October of '42. That was sort of a first piece of the Southern Regional Council that came out of that. They had another meeting of whites then in Atlanta, and then they had a joint meeting of delegates from the two groups in Richmond in June of '43. I wondered if you had any involvement with any of that.

JHF: No, I didn't have any involvement. I'm very young at that time, and I'm teaching and writing, but I'm not very active. I got active in the Southern Conference, you know, going to the meetings. I know about those meetings, black educators, and businessmen. I guess, [James E.] Shepherd and [C. C.] Spauling and people like that.

JE: Yeah, I'm not sure where they met here. I started to say at Shepherd's campus, but it turns out that Shepherd was not too happy about this meeting because he and Gordon Hancock didn't see eye to eye on some things. Hancock was the organizer of this meeting. Maybe they did meet here and maybe Shepherd was involved, but immediately afterward Shepherd wrote a letter to-- oh gosh, I can't remember now who it was, but somebody--in which he, in effect, tried to organize another meeting of a similar nature, and Hancock got incensed at this and felt like he was kind of working behind his back. So they had a little falling out over this.

JHF: Have you talked to my colleague here about this, the fellow who wrote the biography of Hancock?

JE: Gavins? I've been trying to reach him. He's up at the University of Virginia.

JHF: I thought he was still up there.

JE: I haven't been able to reach him yet. I've read his book but I haven't talked to him yet. It may be that it was in his book that picked up this about the thing with Shepherd.

JHF: Yeah, I think it was in there. I think that's where I saw it. I was never persuaded that that was more than a kind of

a power play, you know [laughter]. Which one was going to run the show. I'm not sure that there was a great ideological difference.

JE: I doubt there was. I think you're probably right about that.

JHF: This also is to be considered, namely that Shepherd was--you know much about him?

JE: No, I really don't. I wanted to ask you about him.

JHF: Shepherd was a strange man. He was a conservative by day, and a kind of radical by night. He really wore two hats. He was very anti-segregation, very, had no truck with it. I was amazed to discover, for example--he told me, I knew him very well. He had great confidence in me. He liked to be with me because I didn't take him too seriously. I would joke with him. He knew everybody else was afraid of him. One day he said, "Franklin, you can be anything in this college except president. Now what do you want to be? I want you to be close to me, be a dean of some kind." I said, "Well, I'm not interested in being a dean." "What do you want then?" "I don't want anything." He said, "I'll give you tenure." I said, "I already have tenure. I'll be here until I get ready to go, not when you get ready for me to go." And he said, "Franklin, you're crazy. I don't understand what it is you want if you don't want to be a dean. You don't want to be vice president." I said, "I want one thing. You know what people say when they pass up and down Fayetteville Street? You know what they say now." He said, "What?" I said, "They say that's Jim Shepherd's school." And he laughed, you

know, with a self-effacing modesty, you know, but he agreed [laughter].

JE: That's what it was.

JHF: That's what it was. And I said, "And do you know what my ambition is? I hope that if I stay here, people will pass this street out here and say, 'You know, that's where John Hope Franklin teaches.'" That's when he says, "Franklin, you are crazy." [Laughter] But he would never leave this city in a segregated railroad car. He took the drawing room right out of here. He didn't go downtown to shop. He either shopped in New York, or if he wanted to shop here, you know, he had people to send things out.

JE: Out to his house.

JHF: To his house and to his office. You know, sometimes I'd go in and talk to him, looked like a store. And of course, they just worshiped him downtown. They thought he just didn't have time, so busy. But it wasn't just that. Sometimes he was sitting down there doing nothing. He could have been downtown. So he was something of an enigma, not to be regarded as a mere, old fashioned, hat in hand, conservative Negro. He wasn't that at all.

JE: Some people say Hancock was at times that way, and certainly in some of his correspondence with whites there is a tone of that. But I read him, particularly in Gavin's book and other things that I find, as having a tougher edge on him than that.

JHF: You've read What the Negro Wants?

JE: Yeah, that's the next thing I want to ask you about.

JHF: A chapter in there on. . . .

JE: Yeah, you know the story, I'm sure, about how that all came to be.

JHF: Yeah, Rayford Logan was one of my closest friends. We weren't all that close at that time, but we came to be quite close later. And I knew about this problem with Bill Couch.

JE: I found a letter that Logan wrote to Couch in May of '43, in which he gave him a list of the people that he was asking to write essays for that book. He ranked them according to their place on the ideological spectrum. I'd like to run that ranking by you to see how accurate you think that was. On the extreme right he had F.D. Patterson and Gordon Hancock. This was Logan's line-up. He had right of center, Charles Wesley, Charles S. Johnson, Leslie P. Hill, those three.

JHF: I'm not sure that Charles Wesley was that much right of center, not with Charles Johnson and Leslie P. Hill. I would put him more towards the center.

JE: Then he had a left of center group, made up of Sterling Brown, Rayford Logan, A. Phillip Randolph, George Schuyler, and Walter White. All that left of center.

JHF: I would push George Schuyler a little more toward the center.

JE: I would too. I had that feeling when I read him.

JHF: More toward the center. He might even be right of center.

JE: Certainly later on in his life he was.

JHF: Yes, that's what I'm trying to make certain that I'm not getting fuzzy about later on.

JE: Then on the extreme left he had Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, and [W. E. B.] DuBois. That's not far off.

JHF: I wouldn't have any problem with that.

JE: You couldn't quarrel much with that, could you?

JHF: No.

JE: This guy Couch is a puzzle to me. Here's a guy who thought of himself as a liberal. Of course, a lot of whites did at that period of time. He was active, he ended up being the national associate director of the Writer's Project for WPA. This was after he had started at the press. During his tenure at the press, which was roughly from '32 to '45, the press published a tremendous number of important books on social issues in the South, a significant number of them by blacks. If that's all you knew about the man, you would have a sense of his being somebody you could rely on like Frank Graham.

JHF: Pushing the program forward whenever possible.

JE: But then this happened, and the essay he wrote just added insult to injury.

JHF: I could never understand how Rayford, with his fire and his general position, would have tolerated that. I mean, I would have withdrawn the book.

JE: Well, he threatened to sue him.

JHF: I know, I know.

JE: Maybe that was a, I mean, he wanted that book to be published. That's my reading of it, and wanted Carolina to publish it.

JHF: That's true.

JE: He didn't want to take that to New York, don't you think?

JHF: Yeah, 'course, by that time he was pretty deep into it, too. By the time that he knew that Couch was going to take exception to it, I think he reasoned, as anybody would reason, that Couch would have no problems with this, especially if it represented the whole spectrum.

JE: Spread the whole spectrum.

JHF: You know, Couch had published with me. He published my first book, you know, in '43.

JE: Same year, as a matter of fact.

JHF: I'm trying to understand why Rayford would go that far. He had also published Rayford's other book, hadn't he?

JE: Yes, he did, and I can't remember the year, but this wasn't the first one. I'm almost certain of that.

JHF: He did Diplomatic Relations.

JE: I believe he did.

JHF: Of the United States and Haiti.

JE: And I believe it was prior to this, wasn't it?

JHF: Oh, yes, it was prior to it.

JE: In the '30s or maybe about 1940.

JHF: Yeah, early '40s or maybe very late '30s. Rayford got his PhD late, I mean, for him late, '36.

JE: Are all of these people dead now? Hancock, Wesley, Johnson, Hill, Sterling Brown, Logan, Randolph, Schuyler, White, Langston Hughes, Wright, and DuBois, they're all dead?

JHF: Yeah, they're all dead now.

JE: What about this list? Saunders Redding?

JHF: Dead. Died last year, less than three years ago. So did Sterling. Sterling has been dead maybe a couple of years.

JE: And Rayford's dead?

JHF: Yeah, he died. I gave that eulogy.

JE: Frank M. Davis?

JHF: Frank Marshall Davis, I'm not sure about that.

JE: Hylan Lewis?

JHF: No, Hylan's living.

JE: He is? Where?

JHF: In New York. I unfortunately don't have his address.

JE: I'll find it. Nozell Hill?

JHF: Dead.

JE: James Farmer's living. Is he living up in Virginia somewhere?

JHF: Yeah, blind.

JE: Charlotte Hawkins Brown?

JHF: She's dead.

JE: Horace Cayton?

JHF: Dead. [St. Clair] Drake is dead too. He died two weeks ago, St. Clair Drake. He was my son's advisor at Sanford.

JE: John P. Davis, do you remember him? Negro League.

JHF: John P. Davis is dead. John A. Davis is not dead. John A. Davis is Allison Davis's brother. He's living, but he's pretty advanced in age.

JE: I think that book, What the Negro Wants, is a prophetic book. It certainly is for my purposes here.

JHF: Is Mrs. [Mary McLeod] Bethune in that book?

JE: No, she's not. No women in that book. Apparently, he considered two. She was one, and I forget who the other one was. But for some reason he didn't end up with them. That doesn't mean he didn't. . . .

JHF: Mary Church Terrell?

JE: No, it wasn't her. It was somebody else. Somebody's name that wasn't familiar to me. I can't remember.

JHF: How do you explain Couch?

JE: Well, I see certain white people like this. I mean, you just think about it now. In ways, when the crunch finally comes on somebody, like Odum--there was a time when Odum said this is far as I can go. There was a time when Barry Bingham in Louisville said I can't go this far, you know. I think about one or two, even Frank Graham, I guess you could say, when he tried to run for the U.S. Senate and had all that FEPC stuff thrown at him, he had to back peddle or felt he had to. In any case, he did.

JHF: Yeah, yeah.

JE: You see what I'm saying? The only people who never ever gave an inch were people who didn't have any institutional investment, any ties, like Lillian Smith, you know.

JHF: Look at Jim Hunt now, actually running with Helms. Get out of the fold, back peddle.

JE: Yeah, it happens. Thinking about Couch, I think about Virginus Dabney up in, [Richmond] you know. Here's a guy who wrote a book in 1932 called Liberalism in the South. I talked to him. He's still living. He's ninety-one or two years old.

JHF: Virginus is still living? We taught together at Cambridge University one summer. We just would argue every day.

JE: Sweet man and all that, but, I mean, you know, he just did not, he never ever could imagine this working out the way I think Frank Graham really did in his heart. I read Frank Graham as, Frank Graham was right there.

JHF: Yeah, there was no limit.

JE: A thousand times he proved, you know, when nobody was looking, what he was made of. So, you know, when the stakes are high and he's out in public and he doesn't do 100%, I'm not going to say, well, the man sold out. I'm going to say, well, damn, that's just how it works. But Couch, I was told yesterday, George Tindall told me that when, what's this guy's name, Singal, or something like that, who wrote a book, The War Within. It's a history of some of this period. Daniel Singal, I think his name was.

JHF: Oh yeah, Singal, yes.

JE: He has a chapter in there about Couch and the press and all that. Tindall said when that book came out, Couch wrote a fifty page paper attacking this man for his interpretation of his actions at the press. [Laughter] I figure a buy who does that,

you know, really intends to control history with a club if he can, you know. And he was not satisfied with what history was doing to him.

JHF: That's really something.

JE: You know, it just doesn't work. I don't know, but here's basically what I come down to, John. I think this is the story I want to try to tell, three or four points. One is the real prophets of this period are black, every one of them. If you can get thirteen people to write, in 1943, that segregation is really where the problem is and that's what we've got to deal with, and if white America doesn't come to that conclusion for another decade or generation, you have to say that that's where the prophecy was. Secondly, the institutions--universities, press, churches, and of course the political institutions--were really more liberal in the '30s than they were in the late '40s, more willing to be reasonable, to be somewhat dignified in their assessment of things, because they could not conceive at that point of. . . .

JHF: The ultimate outcome.

JE: The ultimate question they had to face. And when they finally did conceive of it, they went the same way as all the rest of the reactionaries.

JHF: Turned tail. I hadn't thought of it quite like that.
[Laughter]

JE: The University of North Carolina was, by any assessment, a real beacon of liberalism through the '30s and up into the '40s. What you said happened at Vanderbilt, didn't

happen here. James Weldon Johnson came on this campus over here, gave talks. There were occasions when that thing was breached, and the press did what it did and the social sciences people did what they did, and Graham did what he did. All within the whole framework and context of segregation. That through the '30s and '40s, and then it came crunch time and Graham left the University and the whole McCarthyism thing came. Finally, the last ironic thing in 1953, it took a court order to get three black students in the University of North Carolina in the segregated facilities and classrooms and treatment. So they ended up where everybody else was, fighting in the courts, resisting, backing up. Churches did the same things. The political parties did, and look at the press. I was amazed to go back and read newspapers in the '30s and '40s and see the editors in little towns all over the South, and cites, writing editorials of outrage against lynching. Saying we ought to do away with white primaries, allow people to vote, serve on juries, all kinds of stuff. What when the time. . . .

JHF: They didn't see the logical results of this?

JE: No. Down the road, they were saying no to FEPC, hell no to integrating schools, you know. And they ended up being defiant. There are some exceptions here, and I'll have to point them out, but basically it was a failure of institutions. The missed opportunity of 1945 to '50 when everything in God's green earth was changing, you know. It wasn't like it was day before yesterday because of the war, and the people in the South felt

that way too. They could adjust to air conditioning over night, or jet airplanes.

JHF: [Laughter]

JE: But they didn't even want to talk about this. So the chance went by, and what we got was a twenty-five year period of bloodshed and turmoil to bring us to the very place we would have been right then. Am I overstating all that?

JHF: No, no, oh no, not at all. And if I may say so, it's a new angle, too.

JE: Well, I hadn't seen anybody do it, and I want to find a way to do that in a narrative account that is full of facts but yet not a scholarly work. I want this to be a popular history, whatever that is.

JHF: Who's going to publish it?

JE: I hope Knopf is. They're real interested in it. I'm about ready to get to crunch time with them and hand them a piece of paper or two, and see if we can get a contract together.

JHF: I think you've got something. I really do.

JE: Well, I hope I have. This never would have happened though, would it, without the courts and without protest? The South never would have changed?

JHF: I don't think so.

JE: I can't see it.

JHF: I hinted at it in my presidential address, the South and the problem of change, at the Southern Historical [Association].

JE: Speaking of the Southern Historical Association, were you the first black member of it?

JHF: That I don't know, John, I really don't know, maybe not. I was the first to be on the program.

JE: Do you know when that was? Was that in Memphis?

JHF: No, no, it was in November, 1949 in Williamsburg, in Phi Beta Kappa Hall.

JE: You were on the program?

JHF: Yes.

JE: That was the first time a black person had been on the program of the Association?

JHF: That's right.

JE: When did you first have membership in it, do you recall?

JHF: No, I really don't.

JE: Early, in the '40s?

JHF: Yes, I was already a member. I don't remember how far back I went. I always believed, you see, that I ought to belong to my professional organizations. So I did go back to, I would say, the early '40s. If I had the money to join then, I probably did join in the early '40s. Then Vann Woodward came to me in '47 or '48, and he said, "John Hope, if I get to be chairman of the program committee of the Southern and if it meets in a fairly respectable [laughter] place, would you be on the program?" I said, "Well, yeah." So he became chairman of the program committee, and it was going to meet in Williamsburg which was supposed to be pretty good, you know, [laughter] better than some

places. Then he announced to the program committee what he had done, and they like to have died.

JE: They didn't like this too much.

JHF: They didn't like that at all! At all!

JE: but he stuck by it.

JHF: "What have you done to us? What have you done to us?" They raised hell, and then it's, you know, "How you going to arragne it?" But all through this long shot song and dance about "Where's he going to stay? Where's he going to eat? Where's he going to be on the platform? Will there be white people? Will he be on a platform that is higher than them, and therefore he'll be talking down to the white people in the audience?" All these things. "Who's going to be on the program with him?" You know, the session where you have two papers. Bell Wiley volunteered to be on the program with me, and Henry Commager volunteered to preside.

JE: So he introduced you?

JHF: You couldn't get in that place. It was on the ground floor of Phi Beta Kappa Hall. [Laughter] People even looking in the windows on the side. And it passed without a hitch.

JE: Did you get a good reception?

JHF: Got a good reception. Mrs. Lyon Tyler--that's the only question that I can remember--she said, "I don't understand how we can sit here and hear him use the term, Civil War, when he should call it the War Between the States." And everybody broke out laughing. [Laughter] Everybody just laughed at her. You know who she is? Mrs. Lyon Tyler is the daughter-in-law of

President John Tyler. She goes back that far. It seems that President John Tyler married when he was real old and had a baby. Then his son married when he was real old and had [a son] Lyon G. Tyler, who later was, I guess, maybe president of William and Mary. One of these very reactionary-type historians anyway.

JE: Lyon?

JHF: Lyon G. Tyler, that's a well known name in southern history.

JE: That's outrageous. Well, what did they do about the other things? Where did you stay?

JHF: Well, Douglas Adair (), we had this all fixed up. But Vann let them squirm. He said, "Well, you know, he's very resourceful. He might bring his pup tent and K-rations." [Laughter]

JE: He held their feet to the fire, huh?

JHF: Yeah. And meanwhile, I sent my application in to the hotel. Came in the program, you know. But Douglas Adair, I never did hear from them. By this time everybody knew that I was coming. Douglas Adair, the editor of the William and Mary Quarterly, an old friend of mine, he and Virginia invited me to stay with them, and I stayed with them. As I remember, I didn't eat any meals--Williamsburg Inn and Lodge was not open then, 1949.

JE: You did not attend the banquets?

JHF: I don't think I did. I'm sure I didn't.

JE: Gosh, '49, man. Imagine that. God.

JHF: So then I had this theory. I was on the program committee. I was on the various committees of the Association. Then it was Bell Wiley--I didn't go to many of the meeting. When I was on the program committee, I said I'll work hard to make it the most attractive program that will draw in everybody but me. I won't go. [Laughter] Then one day in 1969, Bell Wiley called me and said, "John Hope, you know what happened today at the Southern?" "No." "You were nominated for vice president." [Laughter] I just couldn't believe it. So I became president the following year.

JE: You were president in 1970?

JHF: I think so. I've been president of all those other major historical societies. I always liked the fact that it was the Southern, the first big organization that named me president.

JE: But God, that late, though. I mean, I just. . . .

JHF: Don't forget, the Mississippi Valley, which later became the Organization of American Historians, was still arguing at that time about meeting where black members could participate and that sort of thing. [Laughter]

JE: The Southern Sociological Association or Society, I guess it was called, had Charles Johnson as its president in 1945 or something like that. There's man that, you know, I've learned a lot about him in this process, and my admiration for him has really gone higher and higher as I read about him. He was present at the creation of a lot of things.

JHF: Yes, he was really--I got to know him, of course, quite well, both as his student, and then later I was on his

board. I was on the board when he died. I came to be one of his enthusiastic supporters which I wasn't in the beginning. But I came to have more and more respect for him, admiration for him. He was a really remarkable man.

JE: There's no biography of him, is there?

JHF: No, no, somebody's working on one. A boy named Robbins, he's a sociologist. His base is U Mass, Boston. He was here working on it. I mean in Chapel Hill. He was around in this area working on his book last year or the year before. He's white. Robbins.

JE: How did you read Charles Johnson's sort of personal response to all of the racial stuff of his time? He comes across from this distance as a sort of cool, diplomatic man who never showed his feelings, but, you know, he had to have feelings. What were they underneath all that? Was he angry?

JHF: Well, I think he was cool. Well, yeah, I think so. He was a cool diplomat and he would never, ever show an anger that might endanger his getting to the next step. He was powerful, very influential, and he knew it, and he was going to keep it that way. But it wasn't personal, I mean, it wasn't for his own personal aggrandizement. He was a hard working, hard driving person. Just killed himself.

JE: Very prolific, turned out a lot of work, didn't he?

JHF: Yeah. He had a big organization, though, quite a lot of people that worked for him. I worked for him when I was nineteen, senior at Fisk, summer of 1934, when he was working on Shadow of the Plantation. I was one of those persons who did, I

was an assistant to a chap who was doing research for him in Mississippi among the cotton farmers.

JE: And you say that your impression of him at that early time was not all together favorable?

JHF: I didn't have him as a professor except in a great course on (). Students were always complaining. His research assistants were complaining. And people said he was too close to white people, you know [laughter]. That he must have been selling out partly. Then his research assistant were always talking about how exploitative he was. Taking advantage of them, beating them down, getting a lot of grants and not being generous with them. How much of that's true, I don't know.

JE: His colleagues in the field--Odum, Vance, Guy Johnson, to name three over here at Chapel Hill--I've talked to Johnson who's still living.

JHF: I know. Guy and his wife, who was one of my closest friends, died last year.

JE: He's a good guy and sweet man. But John, even there, even there, I mean, these guys were not willing to fight these battles at that time, were they? Nobody would say, for example, "Look, there are at least a dozen, really top notch, black sociologists in America. You know, what's the problem? Why can't we get one of those guys on the faculty over here and just breach this problem?

JHF: Oh! No!

JE: I mean, this is totally out of the question, huh?

JHF: Beyond their ken. And I remember when, I'll never forget this, Guy became head of the Southern Regional Council. He left Chapel Hill for a while to do that. I think that was at the urging of all the "liberals," felt that he was man to do it.

JE: They had him lined up.

JHF: As he said, on one occasion, we must capture the foothills before we get to the mountain.

JE: Yeah, that was his strategy.

JHF: Yeah.

JE: See, almost the very month that he took that job, there was an article in--what's her name, Pearl Buck had that magazine or she was one of the founders of "Common Ground." Remember that magazine? There was an article in "Common Ground" by Saunders Redding and Lillian Smith. It had to have been written before SRC was really chiselled in stone. Came out like in February after the creation in January, in which they said this is just another bunch of folks getting together to talk. They're not going anywhere.

JHF: [Laughter]

JE: And Guy Johnson, incensed by that, insisted on and got permission to write a response that was in the following issue, and he used that very phrase, "Capturing the foothills."

JHF: I remember that.

JE: And that was always the answer. The answer always was, "Well, look, we're going to get to that somewhere down the road." But damn, they're on the record a lot of times, including Guy himself, saying, "I really can't imagine, in my life time or the

life time of anybody in this room, that segregation won't be the way of life in the South. Whether you like that or not, that's just the hard facts."

JHF: You know, when I came down here, fifty years ago, to do research, I didn't know who Guion Johnson was from a hole in the wall. But I have great respect for her. I'd read that great book of hers which I thought maybe, to write that book she must have been toward the end of her life.

JE: She was young.

JHF: So I called over to her house. I was in Chapel Hill. This was the spring of '39. I was in Chapel Hill. I said she's one of the people I've got to see, because she had a whole chapter in there on the free Negro, and I'm writing a book on the free Negro in North Carolina. I was wondering whether she was able to see me. I was thinking about it in terms of her physical capacity because I thought she might be 85 or 90. And then the maid answered the telephone, and said, "She took the children to school." Must be great grandchildren, I said to myself. Said, "Where are you?" I said, "I'm just using the pay phone." Said, "Well, you call back in twenty minutes. She'll be here." So I gave her a half hour. I'm at Sutton's Drugstore here on Franklin Street. I gave her a half hour. I called back. I told her who I was and what I was doing. She said, "Where are you?" I said, "I'm at Sutton's." She said, "I'm coming right down to get you." She came right down there to get me, and she jumped out of the car, and I was just flabbergasted! Here was this young, vivacious woman. She said, "Just get in the car and go out to my

house." I spent the day. Guy came home for lunch. That's the first time I'd ever met him. From that day on, we've been great friends.

JE: Beginning of a warm friendship?

JHF: Yeah.

JE: So on that personal level, you know, I would never in a minute fault somebody like that for not being, you know, anything less than. . . . But somehow in the public arena, it just never, it just seemed, I guess, impossible. It seemed beyond imagining.

JHF: Even so though, it struck me that they would have me to their house for lunch and spend the day.

JE: Yeah, you may have stayed with them some?

JHF: No, I didn't stay with them. But that was not common in 1939 for any faculty member at Chapel Hill to have blacks for lunch.

JE: Yeah, that's absolutely true.

JHF: People see me going in and out, you know [laughter]. But they were wonderful, and so we've been friends. We went to their 60th wedding anniversary reception three years ago. She was great.

JE: Well, that's pretty much the ground. I really needed maybe some reassurance as much as anything. I just wanted. . . .

JHF: No, I think you've got something, I really do.

JE: I believe I can make a good story out of it. There's no question it is a good story. If I can find a way to write it that has, you know, some character and quality and readability.

It does have possibilities at least, because the story is a rich, good story.

JHF: Well, there were plenty of incidents and things going on that make it so.

JE: I saw an old friend of yours in Louisville about a month ago, Lyman Johnson.

JHF: Lyman Johnson, oh my God.

JE: I told him I would be seeing you, and he said, "Please, please, give his love and respect to John Hope Franklin."

JHF: Oh my.

JE: And he told me in great detail about how you. . . .

JHF: He's must be nearly 80.

JE: Oh yeah, he's 85.

JHF: 85!

JE: He told me all about how you came to testify in that Kentucky case.

JHF: Yeah, Johnson v. University of Kentucky.

JE: He's a lovely man.

JHF: Yeah, well, I'm glad to know he's still kicking.

JE: I appreciate this a lot, John.

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE B

END OF INTERVIEW