

Methodist University Community Oral History Project
Methodist University
Fayetteville, NC

Bert Graham

Interview Conducted by
Crystal TorreMichel
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North Carolina State Veterans Home

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Civil Rights Movement and Jim Crow Era

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Descriptive Table of Contents:

Bert Graham is a retired Air Force Airman. He is an African American who grew up in New York and then moved to retire in Fayetteville, North Carolina. Graham grew up in the Jim Crow era and grew accustomed to the “separate but equal” system. The military was fully integrated when he enlisted, however, it was still “separate but equal.” However, he took advantage of the opportunities the military granted, like taking college courses. He was very much aware of the lack of civil rights he was enduring, although he didn’t agree with it, he accepted his fate as a young African American because it was a normal environment for him. Graham held a pragmatic view before, during and after the Civil Rights Movement. He discusses a few experiences he had growing up as an African American and being an adult during the 60s including “White Flight.”

0:25 –discussion of family

-description of why he moved to Fayetteville

1:29 –childhood experiences

-discussion of White Flight; mentions the military and college courses

3:42 -discussion of racism within New York

-living among racism; how the community dealt with racism

5: 37 – turned away from housing due to racism

-mentions difficulties African Americans endured after War

7: 24 –African Americans delighted in their own communities

8:36- Discusses the everlasting attitudes of racism

-mentions Civil Rights’ incomplete impact on African American liberties

10:50 -Didn’t think the Civil Rights movement changed very much, despite its continuing to help

-mentions Martin Luther King, Stokely Carmichael, H. Rap Brown

12:04 -the need to continue fighting, to do things that might put one behind bars

-America’s disproportionate, and disproportionately black, prison population

12:55 -his military experience. Trained in Texas, went overseas, came back, was stationed in Oklahoma

-went back overseas, was stationed in Arkansas.

13:35 -continued to see prejudice in America.

-moving in Little Rock, Arkansas in 1965-66, felt racial hatred, white privilege from a white woman

15:57 -this taught him that people didn’t want him to get ahead

-thanks God for taking care of him.

16:45 -in the military, he experienced clubs for white and black members not being integrated

-“integration in the early times of Civil Rights didn’t mean anything,” with the threat of violence

17:35 -the current military, he thinks, is more harmonious socially as well as institutionally

-in his time in the military, he was never invited to a white person’s home

18:45 -his experience taking college courses through the military, correspondence courses

-followed his interests to study religion and business law

19:58 -this helped him advise others in his church

-the military gave him opportunities, yet he still felt racial separation

21:00 -the military still had racism in it while he served

-it's difficult to change a person overnight

23:15 -he really admires the military today, the training it offers to diverse Americans

-“when you put us all together, that’s what makes America so good.”

Interview of

BERT GRAHAM

Interviewed by

CRYSTAL TORREMICHEL

0:01

TORREMICHEL: So, today is April 13, 2016. Time is 9:21 [AM], and I'm here with Mr—

0:13

GRAHAM: Graham, Bert Graham.

0:14

TORREMICHEL: And are you from Fayetteville?

0:16

GRAHAM: No, I'm from New York City.

0:18

TORREMICHEL: Okay. So tell me about your parents, where you come from, and how you came down here to Fayetteville.

0:25

GRAHAM: Well, both of my parents are deceased, but I'm down here because of the military and my son who went to live here. Also, I chose it as a place to permanently retire after the military and also

living in New York for the duration of my life up to that time. But I find it—I find it pretty good living in this area right now. Here I am. My parents mostly lived in New York and all family members lived in New York, They and I would say eighty percent of my family all passed away. Except for second generations, I guess, from my father and mother. Other than that, just an old retired person trying to get along with a little illness here and there.

1:24

TORREMICHEL: OK. How was your childhood in New York?

1:29

GRAHAM: My childhood was great. I attended my schooling, to a place called Boys High School. And then from there I went in the military, and while in the military, I did some college courses, and after I retired I also took college courses to help me advance with different types of jobs. Going back to childhood, we didn't have that much problems as far as Civil Rights go there. But there was an underlying factor, and we knew that there was problems between blacks and whites or any other minorities, and we just had to live with it. 'Cause if you tend to stray off in another neighborhood from where you lived, yes, people called you names, They didn't want to accept you, They didn't want you to be, as a family, moving close to them, and they also moved. At that time, it was called White Flight. Which was mostly, if a neighborhood was all white at one time, and a few Blacks or Hispanics start moving in, they would move to the suburbs. And it was just a continuous thing.

2:53

TORREMICHEL: So, did you ever move into those neighborhoods and you've witnessed, like, the white people just moving out because of the minorities moving in?

3:03

GRAHAM: Yes. A part of Brooklyn, where I lived, there was—in fact, the house that we bought—was a brownstone house previously owned by a white family. And I don't think they moved because of White Flight, they moved because of their age factor. But others moved because of allowing other black families to move in and purchase their own homes.

3:32

TORREMICHEL: So it was the atmosphere, was that there was racism. The thing was, you learned to live with it and to accept it?

3:42

GRAHAM: Yes. We all knew there was racism within neighborhoods, within city and states. But in New York itself, it was a little bit under-covered-type of thing. We tried to deny it, when I say “we tried,” both blacks and whites, you know, always, “oh there's nothing going on here, and we just get along.” And I think that happens a lot. It was happening a lot of places. But at the same time, yes, there was racism because in New York City, mostly neighborhoods were divided by where a person was from. In reference to, it was certain parts of Brooklyn, where I lived, is certain areas that were all Italian, all Irish, all Jewish, of course all African Americans—at that time, we were called blacks or any other thing that we didn't want them to tag us with. And I think that we accepted it, which we should never have accepted. But those are the things that was happening back in the early and late '40s. And I think it was going on before that, but that would be my time, it started in the '40s and then as I grew to manhood, it was still there. When I left the military, of course, I experienced that also.

5:12

TORREMICHEL: So, how do you think the military dealt with integration? Was there still policies where only Black people can do this and White people can do that? How do you think your experience with the military went in hand with your civilian life? Or did the military enhance you as a Black person?

5: 37

GRAHAM: Well, as you know, the military was not integrated until 1947. [Harry Truman signed Executive Order 9981 to integrate the armed forces in July 1948.] And that's really after the war. Quite a few men who came out of the military couldn't find jobs and that was up to the late '60s and '70s. We were always pushed to the back or pushed away from certain jobs, although we did the job in the military and did it quite well. In the military, it took a order of Congress or through President Truman. So if this happened there, you know it was happening at different bases or different little towns. I'll give you one for instance: When I was stationed in Newburgh, New York, it was at the time, Stewart Air Force Base. They allowed us to live off base. I called an advertisement I saw in the paper. And me, being a person that speaks his mind at times, I let the lady point-blank knew that I was a Black person, in the military, just moving into the area. And I did that due to the fact that I didn't want to go to the house and be turned away before I even get my hand on the door knob. She proceeded to let me know, "Well, thank you, but we have a lot of young white girls living here and it wouldn't be right for you to be able to move in." So, I just took that with a grain of salt and moved on.

7:17

TORREMICHEL: This was on-post housing or off-post housing?

7:20

GRAHAM: No. It was in the town of Newburgh, New York.

7:23

TORREMICHEL: Okay.

7: 24

GRAHAM: Yeah. And it went on in different things, just not in renting. It went on in different restaurants and stores that you might not be able to go to. So, blacks tend to stay to themselves, or in certain neighborhoods: we had our own bars, we had our own restaurants, we had our own places to go to relax, or to build our bodies in the gyms and so forth. And we tend to do that and I think get into trouble with anyone.

8:01

TORREMICHEL: So you're saying that African Americans stuck with each other? You guys did your own thing. At what point did you start to notice that, you know, this wasn't something you were going to settle for? As far as the Civil Rights Movement, you know, when was it that there was a shift that, you know, "this wasn't right anymore and were gonna start for fighting for it."

8:25

GRAHAM: Oh, even after the Civil Rights Movement started, that was still going on. Because the story I just related to you about, is that—

8:35

TORREMICHEL: What year did that story take place?

8:36

GRAHAM: That story took place in 1967, '68, around that time. But it went on even further than that, because, you know, up to the day I feel there's still a little problem with the races. 'Cause we can't just—it's not like a faucet, you can't just turn it off. It takes time. It takes, probably, generations. I know that we're into quadruple generations now as far as Civil Rights. It's going to take much more than that. Maybe it'll even take a century. You know, when the little kids that was born in the '70s have grandchildren, maybe by that time we can see a noticeable change. Yeah, we see changes because you can have a job, you can buy a house where you're supposed to be, where you want it. But we know that's not always true. Because they have divisions that have closed communities. And of course they'll go through and interview people that would like to buy, but for some reason they always maybe refuse. And maybe your income is not good enough, your credit rating's not up to par, and all those things that they use now. Before, they just used the color of your skin. They can check your tax books on you. They can check to see if you have ever been any kind of trouble, military or out of the military. So they have ways of getting around at it. I'm only speaking personally for myself, and reading different things that I read and interpret them as I see it. But, you know, again, it'll only change when we stop having breakfast conversations about different races.