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ANDREW WHITE
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Place of Interview: Sherman, Texas
Interviewer: Donna Kumler
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Oral History Collection

Andrew White

Interviewer: Donna Kumler

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Mrs. Kumler: This is an interview with Andrew White in Sherman, Texas, on Wednesday, September 24, 1986. Mr. White, I wonder if you would just give me some biographical information about where you were born, your education, position, when you came to Sherman, and so on.

Mr. White: I was born on February of 1944 in a small town south of here-- College Station, Texas. I attended Lincoln High School and graduated from there in 1962 and went on to Praire View A&M University and achieved a bachelor of science degree in mechanical engineering. Then I went into the service for two years and then went to work for General Electric as a material control specialist. I spent time--about five years--with General Electric before moving to Johnson & Johnson in 1974, and I went to work for them in New Jersey as a maintenance department manager. After spending six months as a maintenance department manager, I transferred to the Manufacturing Department where I worked as superintendent of manufacturing and maintenance. Then in 1980, I transferred to Sherman, Texas, as a maintenance superintendent and later became the chief

engineer in the job I hold today.

Kumler: You are associated with the local chapter of the NAACP here in Sherman.

White: Yes, I'm the president of the local chapter.

Kumler: Is this a city chapter? A county chapter?

White: It is really a city chapter, but because some neighboring cities do not have enough members to get a charter, we do support outlying cities within Grayson County.

Kumler: And when you came to Sherman in 1980, was the chapter at that time active here?

White: The chapter had been inactive for about seventeen years prior to my arrival.

Kumler: Do you have any idea when the local chapter was established?

White: The local chapter was originally established in 1946.

Kumler: In 1946.

White: That's when we were originally chartered.

Kumler: Would you, as far as you can, describe for me today what you think are the basic needs of the black community here in Sherman in your opinion?

White: In my opinion, the basic needs of the blacks are to exert themselves. I feel the opportunity is available if they would exert themselves and take a little initiative to go out and get what is available today. I feel the reason why they do not do that is because of some past event that is an undercurrent to fear. This is a reason why they do not take an active part in the political arena and the city government

and those things that they could impact if they were to get involved. But that would be a thing that I would think the black race needs more than anything, is to assert themselves and take advantage of the opportunities that are made available.

Kumler: Mr. White, we discussed in a prior conversation about the 1930 incident here in Sherman, where a black man was lynched, the courthouse was burned, and the black business community was destroyed. When and where did you first hear of this incident?

White: I had heard of this as a young lad down in College Station. Probably about 1954 is when I was first made aware of the incident that had happened here, and that was because there was some black movement in that area looking at integrating the schools and possibly changing some of the old rules in College Station. As a result of that, we had a person to come in and try to organize us and tell us about what we would be faced with, and that was one of the things they reviewed with us, is what happened in Sherman in 1930.

Kumler: Who is the person or what agency did they represent? Do you recall?

White: He was with the national NAACP at that time. He was coming down to talk to us about organizing a chapter of the NAACP in College Station.

Kumler: Was this the only incident of racial violence that he cited, or did he mention others?

White: He gave many examples citing the south--Mississippi, Alabama,

and all those areas--but the one that was closest to us was Texas, so that's why I remember that one so well.

Kumler: Do you recall anything that he said at that time?

White: I recall him telling us that...it was not exactly the way I found it out later, but he told us that the black man had assaulted a white woman in the area, and then they had put him in jail; and justice was not seen to be going fast enough, so some of the whites wanted to take justice into their own hands, and they burned the jail. They took him out, and they say that they went out and hung him and then dragged him through the city. But later on, the accounts of that were not exactly the way that he had told it, as I found out.

Kumler: Do you recall any mention being made at that time about both black businesses and black homes that were burned in that incident?

White: The only thing that I recall is that they were telling me that there were some black attorneys and black dentists and doctors that were burned out, and they left; and since that time, there's never been another black practice in the area.

Kumler: I wonder if I could just get your opinion. Why do you think Sherman does not have a black professional class?

White: I feel when you talk about class, I feel there's a black professional class; but if you feel there's black-owned businesses and things of that nature, is that what you're referring to?

Kumler Yes. I'm drawing a comparison to the business community and the professionals. You mentioned the lawyer, the doctors, and so on--those people who were here in 1930, and their businesses were destroyed. I'm interested in knowing why you think today in Sherman, we do not have a black attorney or a black doctor or a black dentist.

White: My opinion, just through research in the last six years, and in the difficulty in trying to unify the black population now, is that since they were burned out, there is a fear that the same thing would happen again. Even though the majority society has opened up and said we could do anything that we would like to do, there's still fear that runs deep in the heart of the individuals who have lived through that, and trying to get them to unite to build a base for black business to come into this area is very, very difficult.

Kumler: Okay, so you attribute the difficulty in reestablishing this community to that particular experience.

White: I think it is still there.

Kumler: It is still there. You described it as an undercurrent.

White: It's an undercurrent.

Kumler: Okay. What attitudes have you encountered within the white community here as far as trying to reestablish black businesses in this area?

White: I have found that they are very receptive to allowing us to get into any business that we would desire. Again, I say

one of the problems that the black race needs to assert themselves.

But there's still a great deal of power. The power base is still within the majority society. So it's not as easy as I would think, that is, to say you can go out and establish a business, because the power base is still with the majority society. All the attorneys are white; all the judges are white; the county attorney is white; the police department for the most part is white. So the power still rests with the majority society. Even to carry over into the school system, we do not have a black principal; we do not have a black person in administration. Therefore, the power base is still within the majority society. While they are receptive, they have not initiated any action to make these things happen, either.

Kumler: Can you describe for me specific instances where you have tried to attract professionals to this area and have been unsuccessful, and then would you tell me some reasons why you think the success has not been there?

White: I have tried on three different occasions to establish a black business in the area. I tried first to get a janitorial service established here. The problem we ran into is a financial base. They just did not have the working capital to get established and get a business going. Secondly, I tried to assist in getting a restaurant opened here. Here again,

the pressure of the rent, since the building was owned by the majority society...the rent went up, and the guy just couldn't make ends meet, so therefore he had to drop out of business. Thirdly, I went to the Chamber of Commerce to try to seek out space to bring in a chemical company out of Louisiana and get that business established. So while the receptivity is there, the help is not there to get small business loans and things like that for blacks to get established. Blacks do not have the broad financial base, and if you don't get some kind of help from institutions, then they're just going to fall. Plus, if the black community is not unified to get behind that person and make that business go, then that's the other thing that prevents that business from being successful in Sherman.

Kumler: You mentioned in a previous conversation a gentleman by the name of Charles Chapman.

White: Yes. Charles Chapman is still struggling. To my knowledge all his paperwork is in place. He's passed the bar.

Kumler: This is a young black attorney.

White: This is a young black attorney aspiring to practice in the Sherman area. He's having a very, very difficult time for whatever reasons. I don't know all the reasons. But for whatever reason, he's having a very difficult time to get a practice started because of red tape. He just keeps running into dead end streets. I know he's determined; he hasn't given up. He's still here, and hopefully someday soon we will

have a black attorney here in Sherman.

Kumler: What do the black people here in Sherman who require legal assistance...where do they go for that?

White: Primarily, they come to the NAACP, and we will direct them. If it's a discrimination case, we will direct them to Dallas to EEOC; if it's a case of criminal justice, we will get them a black attorney out of Dallas to represent them. The problem that we have, of course, is that when you go into Dallas seeking an attorney, the fees are so astronomical that most of the blacks are unable to pay those fees. So as a result, they end up accepting court-appointed attorneys, which they do not feel comfortable with and from whom they do not feel they get the best representation; but since they are there, they just represent them and do the best they can. Therefore, the black community doesn't really feel that we have a good representation as related to the justice system.

Kumler: You mentioned a moment ago that one difficulty in trying to establish a business here is acquiring the financial backing, and then you said a second difficulty lays in the fact that the black community itself seems to be so splintered, that they could not get behind the individual and really supply the support that he needed. To what things do you attribute splintering in the black community?

White: I still go back to the undercurrent of the 1930's. It is there. The blacks that live here now and that have money

could support a business, but they would be reluctant to invest their money into a black-owned and black-operated business because of fear of what could happen. Most of them are at retirement age, and they just don't feel that the benefit from their investment will be in their lifetime, so they'll be reluctant. The other generation that's coming on behind them just does not have the working capital to invest and support a black business.

Kumler: Have you encountered these individuals within the black community who have apparently communicated to you this undercurrent? Has that been specifically mentioned in conversation, or is that something that you have just heard? What I'm trying to establish is if that particular incident in 1930 has definitely been regarded in conversation as a reason for this difficulty in establishing business.

White: In talking to the Shermanites that were here during that time, that is their feeling; and then in talking to those who have moved in, it's been their feeling that it's been very, very difficult to mold that group of people to come together. Even for the NAACP. There are probably a little over 3,000 blacks in the Sherman and Grayson County area, and we can only get maybe a hundred of that 3,000 to become actively involved in the group. But we have another 400 who will be card-carrying members, which means they pay their dues, but they don't want anybody to know that they are members of it.

So that's the unity that you're dealing with in this community. And it all goes back to that. Anytime you talk to anyone about why you don't have a black business, why won't black business come to Sherman, it always goes back to what happened and the fear of it happening again because the powers-that-be still lie with the majority society.

Kumler: The 400 card-carrying members--what age are they?

White: Most of them range from age twenty-five up to fifty.

Kumler: And your active members? About what age would they be?

White: They are the same age group. So we have those. But the thing about it is that most of them are transients, which means they are not Shermanites. The active ones, those who have moved in in the last ten to fifteen years, were not born and raised here. So the active members and the leaders in the community today are those that have transferred into Sherman rather than were born and raised here.

Kumler: Do you know the names of individuals that you have encountered in the black community here who recall this incident or who witnessed it or who lived in that period of time?

White: Yes. One person who vividly remembers it, that I've talked to, is Mr. Raymond McKinney. Of course, he was a boy at the time that it happened, but he recalled going down because there was a car that was stalled at the courthouse, and his father owned a wrecker, and he was going down to pick up the car to take from the courthouse. They were allowed to go in

and pick up the car and move on. They had to leave town because of fear of not only the businesses being burned but their own house. They went out to a friend's house in the country until it was over, and it quieted down. They said the next morning they came back into town, and they had government troops sleeping on the porches and the streets, trying to restore order. That's the one person that I have talked to that's given me a vivid picture of what it was like in Sherman during that time.

Kumler: Is there anyone else that you can recall?

White: I have not personally talked to...it's only been through heresay information as to what happened during that time. I have not talked to anyone else directly that lived during that time period.

Kumler: Let me ask you this, then. In your opinion, what's going to be the remedy for this situation? What's going to have to happen in order for this very thriving, sophisticated business district that was eliminated in 1930...what's going to have to happen for that to exist again in this area?

White: I think there's two things that's going to have to happen. One is on the majority side, and one is on the minority side. I think that a business co-sponsored by the majority society will probably be the single most important thing that needs to happen in order to make it successful. The other one is that a black is going to have to start a small business and

just bear the pain of losses and small income until that business will grow and flourish into a business that's a profit-making business. I think those are the two things that I see need to happen.

We have strong black leaders in the community, now. Now what we need is to rally behind getting a business in and building it up. We do have several small businesses. We have a new catfish restaurant now, and we have a beauty supply that's striving. We have a lot of small black businesses that are trying.

Kumler: Welby Pleasant is...

White: Welby Pleasant is getting into janitorial service. What needs to happen is that we as blacks need to rally behind these individuals and support them, and then if these businesses can grow big enough so they can start hiring, that's what's going to make it successful. That'll take time in order to do that because you have to unify people before you can make a business successful--start it from the ground as a small business.

But if you want to do it quickly--and this is what I meant with some of the white leaders in the community--you're going to have to have a joint venture, whereby it is supported by the majority society or maybe owned and operated 51 percent by white business interests. Then that would take off. I think that would stem the tide. I think the city is ready for

that, but I don't know anyone who's stepping out and wanting to be the leader in making it happen.

Kumler: Are there any other black businessmen other than the three that you've mentioned? Are there any others?

White: Yes. We have one that currently we're working with now in the construction business, Arthur Taylor. He's striving. He's the same one that started out in the restaurant business. He couldn't make it there. Then he went into a joint venture with contracting, and he's doing very well there. He's there and then we have some small ones such as a shoeshine business. We capitalize on anything we can. Then we have several black beauticians that work in the area, but they're all very, very small businesses.

Kumler: Is there anything else that you would like to comment on? That just about covers what I wanted to ask you.

White: I would just probably reiterate the fact that the time has come, and if you look at what has happened to Sherman since the 1930's, Sherman has not been very, very encouraging to the black man to venture out and do things because if you look at the system which we are operating against, it's very, very difficult for them to make a breakthrough. I realize that Sherman on the heels of the 1930 incident...there was a smooth transition of integration, but the smooth transition of integration caused us to lose a lot of ground because in the black community today the black children do not have

professional role models that they can look up to in positions of authority. Prior to integration, there were black principals; there were black administrators. So they were available, and black children could look and aspire to being something. But today the only professional person that they see first is probably a counselor. That's the highest black official we may have in the school system. Therefore, if they don't want to be a teacher or an assistant principal or a counselor, then what is there for them? So they end up not being able to see an established black role model who can give them career guidance and counsel because there's only one black counselor in the entire school system. So while we had a smooth transition in integration, we lost ground as related to propelling the black community into a position to be competitive. I realized that the white community has said that it's open. Yes, it's open, but if you don't have a foot in the door, it's very, very difficult to get there.

Kumler: Apparently, there's still a great deal of control.

White: The control is still there. While on one hand, there's talk about relinquishing that control, the action is not there. I'm not sure, in my six years, who to fault. I think there's blame to be laid at both doors. I think the majority society has said it's available, and I think the minority society has been a little reluctant to step out and grab it because of fear for what might happen. I go back and remember when

we were trying to reestablish the NAACP here. It was very, very difficult to get professional people—I restate “professional people”—to sign up. The common reason that they gave was fear of their job. When you do not have a person in the position of authority to protect them, then they didn't want to be identified with the NAACP because the NAACP to most majority society is viewed as a trouble-making group.

We're not a trouble-making group. Our objective is to unify the community and make use of all of its resources. If we can prepare our black girls and boys to be successful and go into society and be competitive, then there will be less of us on welfare. Therefore, the entire community will benefit. Our role is not to march and demonstrate and tear down and burn. Our role is to unify the community and make use of all its resources, because we are a valuable resource to the community. You'll either be a help, or you'll be a drain; and if we're not productive, we're a drain on society; but if we are productive, we can help society. And that's what the role of the NAACP is. It's not to file suit. We don't even get involved in filing suits. We are more counselors. We counsel people and direct them as to where they should go to get the proper advice, and we also tell them when we feel they don't have a case.

I think Sherman is probably ready for a change, but I

see the change as slow in taking place.

Kumler: Thank you very much.