

ROBERT PENN WARREN - CONVERSATION WITH T. H. WHEELER

RPW: There are several things I'd like to know simply about the institution, if I may. If you have some prepared material, you know - date of founding and names of founders and early locality of the bank and history of the bank - that would be useful to me. But if what you have is available on paper, you know - annual statements that you have published and those things - let us say in conversation things of that sort - (not audible) - general history. What about this location? How long have you been here?

THW: Well, we have been in this block since 1908.

RPW: You started here then?

THW: That's right. Not in this same building, but we have been - we were next door.

RPW: Yes. I see you have a new - an architect's drawing out there - a sketch hanging on the wall. Is that a projected -

THW: No, this is our new building in Charlotte.

RPW: In Charlotte. How many branches do you have?

THW: Three.

RPW: Where are the other ones?

THW: There's one here, one in Charlotte, and one in Raleigh.

RPW: This is the original one, isn't it?

THW: That's right. This is the home office.

RPW: The home office.

THW: Very shortly we'll have one more in Durham. We have received permission to open it up.

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RPW: I see. I also wanted to get - you probably have a lot of this in some sort of form that you can give me - prepared - some biographical material. I suppose you have some biographical sketch that I -

THW: Yes, I do.

RPW: I won't trouble you about that then now. Let me push on to some other topics, then, if I may. The whole question of - business is a field that I know nothing about to begin with - the whole question of Negro business as I have read it in the people who write about it, you see, has been a real puzzle to me. That is, by and large - and this is said by a good many sociologists - it seemed to lag behind the development in certain other fields of achievement, that is, as compared to Negro writers or Negro artists of various kinds or scholars, and by and large it has not kept at the same level of achievement. Does that seem to you to be true or not?

THW: Yes, it's undoubtedly true, although there have been some significant achievements by Negroes in the field of business.

RPW: There have been - yes, indeed - clearly. But to go back to an earlier stage, a little earlier stage, how would you account for that lag?

THW: Well, particularly since the turn of the century, any Negro in business has suffered from the artificial barriers which keep him away from the total market. This is true all over the United States, not just in the South, but probably much more rigidly

enforced in the South in terms of residential separation, understandings between real estate boards that there be no - actually in most of the charters of the real estate boards throughout the country, they cannot sell certain property to Negroes, and no Negro can be a member. The groups of appraisers have not until recently begun to admit Negro appraisers, no matter how well qualified. This is in the real estate business. Location is extremely important. Even now there are problems down in the heart of New York. If a Negro purchaser or a Negro tenant comes into question, and the minute he comes into the picture there are barriers even now.

RPW: How do you account for the success of this institution in the light of this?

THW: Well, this has been a matter of sheer determination, and also it's a question of having been in the kind of business that met a very urgent need among Negro people. A life insurance - there were several life insurance companies that for years refused to write policies on Negroes, and I can think of a very large one in Virginia which is just now returning to the Negro market. They went out of it about 1908 or '09. One of our largest insurance companies in the whole country for years wouldn't write any Negro risks - sick benefit policies - and their life policies were limited to those with the least forfeiture value. In many cases the rates were higher because the risk was rated as sub-standard. So that this gave the Negro insurance company a clear field. In

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the banking business there has always been a great need for Negro people to pursue a policy of thrift and at one time there were - oh, I'd say well over fifty institutions in the country that called themselves banks that were operated by Negro people. This - you see the beginnings of this way back in Reconstruction, and the great movement to get the Congress to authorize the Freedmen's bank -

RPW: Yes - yes. That was the first one, wasn't it?

THW: Well, before that there were some efforts at loan societies and savings groups - all over the country - that the Freedmen established on their own. But they were hoping for big national institutions which the Freedmen's bank created an image for. It was - of course you know the story of how even the federal - the color of federal protection - the bank failed, and Congress refused to restore the savings of the depositors. These institutions, wherever they have been, have done a great deal to create a sense of pride and the respect of communities - in their respective communities - and those that have survived and - have created an entirely different market.

RPW: In what sense?

THW: Well, if there were limited lending policies, the Negro customers in a town - the entrance of an institution, no matter how small, operated by Negroes that began any kind of lending operation immediately has caused some change on the basis of competition.

Sometimes the competition was not very real, but the prospects of it becoming real have changed the policies of many institutions in the South not operated by Negroes. This is true with insurance companies. I can recall that in the '30's, when there was no market for any FHA loans under Title 2 to a Negro borrower, and such market as there was existed in one or two Negro insurance companies. The big insurance companies and big institutional investors in the country would not . Now many of them are bidding for these, after they found out that the borrowers in this group were regular in their payments, that the incidence of foreclosure was even lower than in the cases of some white groups. Now they have been bidding for these within a certain range. This creates a whole new market, it creates a new market among the banks and its - and what they may want to do in the lending process. This goes for Negro businessmen and businesses wanting capital loans and so forth.

RPW: Clearly the real estate as pictured does not apply to a new institution, though, does it?

THW: Well, the town grew up around these.

RPW: It grew up around you.

THW: Yes, you see this property here is owned by the North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance Company. We lease our quarters here from them. But the town was very small when they bought this, and they have just grown with it. Their resources are about \$82,000,000.

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now, the insurance company's are. Our bank's resources are about fifteen million. But we have grown with the town.

RPW: Yes. Do you think that - this is a hypothetical question, and it may be an inappropriate question - or at least it may be an inappropriate question for you to put on the record at all - I don't know - suppose you were coming in - you, being such an organization - to a location next door or down the street - (not audible)

THW: I think a great many people would say it would be quite possible, but I am convinced that it wouldn't be as easy to do as it would be if this institution were manned entirely by white persons, and this is in 1964. It would not be nearly so easy as if the prospective purchaser was a white person or a group of white persons. This is true now all over the South still.

RPW: I hear it's true in Harlem too.

THW: Yes, it is.

RPW: (not audible) But tell me this, now. How much overlap - business overlap - I don't mean statistically but I mean between this bank and white clientele - how much integrated business is there - that's what I want to know.

THW: Approximately ten percent of our dollar volume is from our white customers, and we've had them since we opened.

RPW: The same percentage or roughly the same people?

THW: Not the same percentage - they're not the same people.

RPW: Of course (not audible)

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THW: This indicates though that we're able to bring in customers of both races, but not at the same rate. But we do reach across racial lines.

RPW: This is both depositors and in loans? About the same ratio?

THW: That's right - that's about right. And this is true in all of our offices - in Charlotte and in Raleigh too.

RPW: How much expansion - business expansion is predictable do you think? Not only in the South but elsewhere, for Negroes. Do you have any tentative views on that?

THW: Well, the means by which you measure this - you look at the average of the median family income of Negro families throughout the South, compared with the median family income of white families - the Negro families enjoy just about half, and in the last ten years each group has gone up, but it's still about half. In some of the bigger cities the gains of the white population have been greater, although there have been substantial gains in the Negro population. I think there was a study two years ago of incomes of Negro and white families in Atlanta, and the Negro income between '50 and '60 rose substantially, but only two percent beyond the rise in the cost of living index. The income of white families rose substantially beyond that.

RPW: Yes, that's the general picture from all the figures I have seen.

THW: That's right. And this leaves them freer for savings, it makes it more difficult to accumulate capital to go into business

in the Negro group. They are very close still to the subsistence level. There are many studies that have been made by Southern Negro colleges on the incomes of the families from which their students come, and on paper you don't see how those students can possibly be in college. They can't be there by any known standards, but they manage.

RPW: Several Negro lawyers I have talked to, in New Orleans, for instance, have made this observation to me. This is Mr. Augustine there, whom you may know. Well, in 1951 and '52 there were two Negro lawyers in New York - it's a big city. Now there are twenty-five or fifty as of last spring when I was last there and talked to these lawyers, discussing (not audible) - twenty-five now. One problem that the lawyers had is that you cannot get Negro clients. That is the problem there - a very complicated problem. I am sure you know more about it than most.

THW: As you may know, I am a lawyer by profession.

RPW: I knew that.

THW: And we think that this - this is in direct proportion to the quality of the administration in the courts. As you get into more liberal areas, the Negro lawyer has a much better opportunity. He does not have the same difficulty in obtaining clients. You see, the courts can make you or break you if they want to be arbitrary, and we have I think fifteen lawyers here.

RPW: This is a town of about a hundred thousand isn't it?

THW: Seventy-eight thousand. And there was a time when we had



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only two. And they dare not try to represent a Negro client against a white person for certain crimes in any outlying community.

RPW: You say they won't, or -

THW: They dare not.

RPW: Yes, they dare not.

THW: Now I can recall when these two lawyers who were the only ones here some years ago went over just forty miles from here to defend a Negro for rape, and they associated with themselves a white lawyer - a very distinguished man of this community. But with the highway patrol and everyone else there trying to protect them, they were shot at when they left, - The courtroom that afternoon. And I don't think it was merely to frighten them. They were actually - whoever was doing the shooting was trying to shoot them. But that climate has changed a great deal since then. Our own courts in this community and throughout North Carolina have - recognize the Negro lawyer as a professional, and in many cases they get their share of appointments to defend persons who are accused of felonies who are paupers, not able to defend themselves. The court - this is within the discretion of the court - they get their share - not their share maybe, but they get a great many of these cases which the bench appoints one of them as the attorney for the accused.

RPW: How many accused white persons are assigned -

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THW: There have been one or two in this community recently. This is a departure. But the rise of the Negro lawyer has been a real hairraising story of courage and determination to practice his profession in the face of all sorts of threats.

RPW: How much of the -

THW: He has won so much of that battle - he's even won a good bit of it in Mississippi.

RPW: There aren't many lawyers there, though.

THW: No, there are only two or three - yes. One doesn't do much practice. But the advent of the Negro lawyer began almost as a movement following World War I, when a number of young fellows who came back to college could hardly wait - they'd seen France, they'd seen what a free world looked like and felt how it was to be treated as free persons - and so many of them came back to this country with a commitment to finish college and go to law school. And the movement began then, and so often, as in the case of James Nabor, of Howard University - almost his first -

RPW: Are you talking about the father or the son?

THW: The father. Almost his first activity in the field was his involvement in the first Texas Primary case that went to the Supreme Court of the United States. This was a commitment that they felt they had to fill, and his involvement has continued until now, and as you know he was very heavily involved in the '54 cases - the Brown case. And the law school at Howard University helped spark the development of the young Negro lawyer. And then you had larger

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and larger numbers of them entering the field and there have been law schools - there's a law school here and another law school at the University of North Carolina now open - this has been very helpful. But this is not the business aspect.

RPW: No - no. But law and business have more of a relation than any two other -

THW: In a way, but on this particular question, when you're wondering whether someone who goes into business is going to be able to survive with a limited market, it's a little different from the professional work of a lawyer, who depends on the attitude of the courts and his fellow lawyers, for the prestige and standing that will attract clients who think that retaining this particular lawyer will be to their advantage. Now this is a key - no matter how confident. So often the deciding question is whether or not the lawyer that is retained will be able to handle the case to their satisfaction.

RPW: To cut back to business for a moment - it is sometimes said in certain sectors of Negro enterprise, segregation has <sup>put</sup> met a protective market - has given a chance that would otherwise perhaps not have been there. The most obvious one that is being cited being undertaking. That's the most obvious one.

THW: Well, I wonder if it's that obvious.

RPW: Well, at least it's said to be - put it that way.

THW: I wonder if it's that obvious. The Negro undertaker in many instances years ago buried white and colored people.

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RPW: That was a long time back.

THW: Yes, but, if he had this market back, if the coming of integration would give him a free market, then he would have no complaint, and this - I think this statement that Negroes who are in business and who are protected by the segregated pattern are the ones who are trying to perpetuate it, is a misnomer. For instance, I know of two hospitals in a town where the white hospital is very irritated that the Negro hospital doesn't fold up because they want the - they need the patients in their clinics for clinical material for their internes and residents. And they need some of the appropriations that they think that this hospital is getting. And they want to integrate the two hospitals and -

RPW: They won't?

THW: They want to - well, really what they want to do is take over the Negro hospital, and the question was raised with them - they said, well, all right, if we're going to put the two together, the director of the Negro hospital is a graduate of one of the big schools in the country in his field, and he outranks the director of your hospital. If you're going to put these two together, who's going to be the director? Now, this - so often we neglect to ask those questions. Sure, he's opposed - sure, he's opposed if you're going to kick him in the street. It's not a question of his wanting to perpetuate segregation. If you're going to put them together he wants recognition of his rank. Now, this is the question everywhere. The Negro who is in a segregated setup that

someone wants to swallow and sweep out of the way and sweep away all the professional level people and hire a few of the clerks, is naturally going to oppose this because there's been no overture to him to come in as an integrated part based on his ability and his experience. And the Negro client of the new institution isn't going to have the protection. They're going to use him and exploit him in every possible way. Now, the white side of this is that they're not being honest. They're trying to - as a smoke screen they're throwing out people this charge of our wanting to protect the segregated pattern, but they have no intention of doing any more than taking over some of our institutions and dismissing our best talent.

RPW: Now, I would be the first person to agree that that exists. I was basing my question on statements by Negroes and not statements by white people analyzing the situation.

THW: Well, many people are misinformed, Negro and white, on this. They haven't thought about it deeply enough. For an instance, we have had one white employee here some years ago, for over a year. He was a man of high competence who came here and worked on the level of an officer. But now we don't have any white employees now but neither do my competitors. We took a Negro out of a - the branch of one of the biggest banks in the country who was running this branch as a segregated branch of that bank.

RPW: A white bank?

THW: Yes. He's a law graduate, he's thoroughly grounded in his

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college work in accounting and economics, a very fine preparation. He is now here for about twenty years of this work, and so - he did his first training with us. And then when this bank thought there might be a Negro bank organized in that town, they wanted to know if they could turn that whole branch over to a Negro management, and they also wanted to know if we would train some of the people. Well, we did - this was about twelve years ago. And then they took this man to run it. When we went to get him back the president of the bank said to me, he said, well, I thought you'd be asking for him back and he said I will not object. He said, really if it was ten or fifteen years further along, he'd have all sorts of opportunities in our organization, because we don't have many men that are his equal. He said but there's nothing to do but to let him go back to you because I can't advance him.

RPW: Was this in the South or in the North?

THW: This was in the South. And you've got a great many Negro clerks in the banks in the North but almost no officers that have authority.

RPW: I know that, yes. I saw the figures on it once.

THW: Very few who are - even have junior officer status. But this man could operate a sizeable operation and had done it to their great satisfaction. But they were perfectly frank in saying that there was nothing else that they could do with him; although he's part of their organization—they must have a hundred branches— and

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some of them very, very large - as much as they need talent and man power, there was nothing they could do with him. If we were to merge today with some large institution in this state, I'm quite sure that they couldn't take our top people and give them the status that they have now. And the only reason is based upon race.

RPW: It's perfectly clear I guess.

THW: So I think this charge is a misnomer and very interestingly, in the case of these hospitals some of the people concerned with the white one have become furious about this because they thought they could arrange for the other one to close and they couldn't work that out on a political basis, and then they threw the charge, and a very angry manner, that here was a group of people who were just trying to perpetuate segregation because they had an interest in it.

RPW: Now, is this a hospital that receives state funds?

THW: Yes.

RPW: Both hospitals receive state funds?

THW: Yes. And they want very badly to integrate their facilities, the big one, so that they will be eligible for some more federal and state funds, but they know full well that if they apply they're going to have problems because they are segregated. And they figure that if they had the Negro hospital out of the way this would be easier. There would be less complaints. They could say we've got some Negro patients. But they haven't gotten to the point where

they would take any Negro doctors on their staff, and if they took them they would limit their practice only to the Negro patients.

RPW: What are the chances for a Negro medical education in North Carolina?

THW: This is another factor in the medical field. All through the South we're having trouble getting the bright young Negro medical students to come back because they don't have the free run of the medical market. They come to a town - in most of the towns they are not permitted to be on the staff of any hospital. But how is a brilliant young doctor going to operate or practice without staff privileges and how is he going to make the most of his knowledge unless he's got the whole market of the town at his disposal?

RPW: There is some set of figures on the medical side of it that I haven't looked at indicating that the increase in the number of Negro doctors has almost come to standstill and the over-all number has been frozen for quite a while. Not even following the population curve.

THW: One of the problems has been that there are very few families who can send their sons, and then the scholarship money, although there's plenty of it in the medical field, doesn't drift to the Negro student in the same proportion that it does to the white student. And then there's this other factor, that if he expects to practice - well, in many places in the East as well as the South, he's stymied in terms of his ability to keep up with the profession, to be in contact with other doctors in the cooperative arrangement



that you find in the hospital where he's a member of the staff - no consultations, he's just got an office and he operates out of there. And you may be told that there are hospitals in the South that have Negro members on their staff, but they have probably picked out one Negro and given him staff privileges which are restricted, and then the other Negro applicants are turned down on the basis that they do not have certain qualifications, while at the same time there are probably in any city of a hundred thousand - there may be twenty-five doctors on that same staff that don't have qualifications any higher than the Negro doctors that they are turning down. They say now the rules require that if we admit you to the staff you've got to have so-and-so.

RPW: Would you make any observation about those doctors who take staff privileges under those circumstances (not audible)?

THW: Well, I've got mixed feelings about it. I'm not in the medical profession. Beyond the observations I have made I don't know whether I ought to go into that part of it.

RPW: You mean you could make some?

THW: I probably could, yes. I'm not sure, though, that I've got my mind made up on that.

RPW: It's a tough one, isn't it?

THW: It is.

RPW: It's a tough one. It's a disservice or a service, you might say, on the restricted question of race pride and race - and advancing the actual relation between white and the Negro race to a

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level of decency. You wouldn't know which way to play it, would you?  
It might be (not audible) -

THW: Well, one reason why a Negro doctor might want to do this -

RPW: I mean, aside from selfish reasons.

THW: He might - somebody has got to get in and see how it's done so you can't give them the runaround any more. I mean, that's on the positive side. This is not a selfish reason. This is - and once he gets in he's got to have the guts to make the demands and say to the other fellows, now come on, I'll support you because I know what they're doing in terms of qualifications of other people who are no better than you are. If he's that kind of man, all right. If he's going to get in and thumb his nose at the rest, I wouldn't think well of him.

RPW: It's a delicate position for a man to be in, isn't it?

THW: Not delicate if he's got his thinking straight.

RPW: Not many people have - at least (not audible) -

THW: Well, I admit that. It's sort of disappointing to find out how many people do not have.

RPW: I was just taking the ordinary situation -

THW: For instance, I'm going to a dinner tonight involving the Democrats in the state, and they invited me. Well, I would not go unless they invited eight other people, and told them I wouldn't be there. Now, I'm not so sure how it might be with some other people.

RPW: You mean they would have gone without stipulating this?

THW: Yes.

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RPW: It happens, yes.

THW: But it's a question of how straight your thinking is on a question like this.

RPW: And some people have easier consciences than others do, too.

THW: That's quite true.

RPW: Or easier satisfied consciences, I mean. How do you - let me preface this remark to this question by saying that among people I have talked with, say, the people who have been in the top level of Negro organizations, you know - big names and on to kids of 21 or 2, there's a very great variety of ideas about what integration might mean, you see. Sometimes a very unclear version of how it may come about or what it would mean in terms of that - what reaction would it be concretely - specifically. How do you think about that question? Some people say it's merely a word, you see. Some people have given a great deal of thought to it and have a very clearcut version of what they mean by it.

THW: Well, we've got a long way to go before a Negro boy or girl or man or woman has the same open invitation to industry and to industrial employment or to training or to promotion advantages that a white person would have. This is what integration would mean to me, that the freedom of movement in the society would be complete. We've been whacking away at the periphery of it.

RPW: You mean on a civil rights basis.

THW: Yes. We've gotten the travel business straightened out some time ago, so far as public carriers are concerned, and the dining

cars and the sleeping cars and now the hotels and restaurants. This establishes the physical movement. But there's also got to be a freedom of movement in all facets of the society. This means if a man is good enough he goes right on to the top. Without saying that this community is not ready now for the Negro to be chairman of the housing authority, which is what we had to happen here the other day.

RPW: The housing authority?

THW: There's a Negro here who's been on the housing authority for about fifteen years and he's been the vice chairman. Three different times when the chairman resigned they by-passed him, and he's got more experience in the housing field than all the rest of the commissioners put together. He's the treasurer of an insurance company here, in charge of their mortgage loans all over the eastern seaboard, and this includes many multi-family projects and much more experience than anybody on the housing authority has or anyone who has ever been on it has had. But someone leaked the word that the community just wasn't ready and hoped everybody understood this. We had a Negro here who had been here seventeen years with a master's degree in recreation, and the recreation director resigned and he was his assistant, and they brought a little boy out of Georgia, twenty-three years old, to take charge of the city's recreation program and said to him frankly - this has been within this year - that we hope you understand that the community isn't ready for - with all your ability - isn't ready for a Negro to head the

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program.

RPW: Who decides that?

THW: The city manager decided this, and the city council's backing. But this is more or less the city manager's decision.

RPW: In other words, there's no way to know whether a community is ready or not?

THW: Well, I'm just giving you the facts.

RPW: Yes. I mean, this excuse is always used, but it's taken on the theory that -

THW: Well, they never will be ready if you're going to wait for everyone to agree. You just try to get someone who's competent and no matter what the opposition make sure that he's going to make the grade. This is what Jackie Robinson did - under tremendous pressure. But he had to be a whale of a ball player or the whole idea would have been a flop.

RPW: Oh, sure.

THW: But look at the people who were in his corner - like Ty Cobb, who at first just couldn't stand this. He said it just never would work. But before he died he not only learned to know him but to like him. We've got to make our beginnings in all these areas, and they're coming hard. They're not coming easily. And the road blocks to Negro employment all over the South are terrific. The employment service - the U.S. employment service operated by the several states is by design a complete block to entering into industry.

RPW: What about the - have you read Whitney Young's recent book?

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THW: Just scanned it - I have a copy.

RPW: Well, his discussion of a - quote - preferential employment versus color counting, you know - that distinction. How do you feel about that?

THW: Well, we've got some catching up to do. There's no question about that. We've got a lot of catching up to do. The state governments and particularly the employment service, as I said, all through the states through the South are geared to do just the opposite.

RPW: Unpreferential employment.

THW: Really the - there's a movement which I think could be documented if we had to, to eliminate every Negro from the employment service in this state. There's too much going on there that a Negro person there shouldn't have a chance to know.

RPW: I was thinking of Whitney Young again. Let me turn to something else related to the future. Some studies - some sociological studies of the recent past have taken the line based on the - what's happened to other ethnic groups in America - the Jews, Italians, Poles, and Irish primarily - that as they have achieved more freedom of movement in society over the past, say, 25, 50, 75 years as the case may be and have moved to a - quotes - integrated status where you will find people of those origins in all sorts of positions - the presidential chair, the Supreme Court, and other places - the general tendency has been for those same groups to become tighter rather than looser. That is, they have the - figures have shown that they moved toward their own again

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(inaudible). This may not be even an important question, but it's an interesting one anyway to speculate about. I have asked a good many Negroes this question. They don't always give the same answer. What would be your answer?

THW: I think we're going through an uncertain phase of this, in which the tide doesn't run as strongly in that direction. But the way I see it, I see some very definite signs of cohesion on a stronger basis than we've had in the past - the immediate past, let me put it that way.

RPW: I wasn't thinking about solidarity in the sense of having a racial objective, you see, that you would win. I was thinking of assuming that you have -

THW: You were speaking of a cultural solidarity.

RPW: A cultural solidarity. Or housing solidarity - moving back to the same locality - reassembling, as it were, by preference in one's own ethnic group. This has happened - according to the surveys I have read, anyway - with the the Italians, Jews, Irish and Poles. You have a reassembling of ethnic groups after some dispersal.

THW: I think it remains to be seen what can happen.

RPW: It clearly will remain to be seen. You can't tell.

THW: Yes. I don't think there's the same degree of solidarity, of cultural cohesiveness, that there was during Reconstruction.

RPW: You mean - you're referring to the Negroes now?

THW: Yes. We may have moved a little way, but to me there are signs of some gelling of this now. We had a phase of it in which -

back the other way. Now, this doesn't have anything to do with concepts that individual Negroes have developed in much, much larger numbers than before concerning integrated housing, integrated employment, in many areas of all-white, all-Negro. In other words - maybe we're not talking about the same thing, but -

RPW: There are several aspects of that. I was thinking of the simplest one, just where people live by choice. If the society is free, you see, you can live where you want to or buy property where you want to and nobody is stopping you, either legally or otherwise or by social pressures.

THW: But there's got to be some freeing up of the housing market. All the job -

RPW: Oh, sure. There's no choice now.

THW: All the good job opportunities seem to lead back to housing position.

RPW: That's true enough. I would take a guess after that happy day when there is mobility of movement, mobility and choice -

THW: Well, I think I'd rather wait and see what happens. The pressures are so strong now, and I don't mean pressures from people, but the pressures of our time and the circumstances in terms of the urgency for moving into position for employment gains and other gains, are so strong now that perhaps this doesn't have an opportunity for any free movement of its own, - I mean a tendency of that kind.

RPW: Several people - well, it's implied in Whitney Young's book



and it's more - it's spelled out by some other people - other Negroes and white people too - that the opening up of society for the Negro is not going to be overhaul of society social and economic overhaul, automation being the crisis that's going to precipitate this. This is what we're headed for - a big economic and governmental overhaul.

THW: I think you're right there. I was born in the South, lived there all my life, just about, I received my education in the South. But maybe I've been sort of foolish but I've never felt that I was outside of the American society. I have always felt my freedom to go anywhere I wanted to go, and participate in anything that I had a desire to participate in. I know this takes some - you've got to develop some blind spots if you believe this, but the changes have been nothing new to me - I'll put it that way.

RPW: In what sense?

THW: I have assumed all along that all of the people are alike essentially. There's no basic difference between people because of race. If you can speak the same language you then are completely on the same base. Maybe I've been naive, but - and I fought pretty hard against injustices in the South all my life. There were things I just wouldn't do as a kid - I wouldn't give anyone a chance to me. And Martin Luther King's father and I were classmates at college, and one of the things about him was that he would never ride on the streetcar in Atlanta or a bus. I admit that I did, but he didn't. There were some other things

that I wouldn't do. But you just turn the blind side to participation in anything that didn't leave you standing in the opposite lane.

RPW: That raises another question now -

THW: And you do it without bitterness and you assume that the people who are said not to like you are going to be all right when you approach them about something. And you do it on an eye level basis.

RPW: The survey that Newsweek started, you know, a year or two - two years ago I guess it was - Brinkley-Huntley survey - one of the figures out of that was that it means a slum and - a rural slum or a city slum among the ignorant and most oppressed brackets of Negroes. You had the most intense feeling that there was no good in the white man. That he never, never, never would be concerned about social problems involving the Negro. The higher you got on the scale of education and responsibility, the more and more this changed. (not audible) we have a fairly high percentage who would express some optimism, some confidence in an ultimate decency or good will in white society.

THW: I don't think it was real though.

RPW: You don't think it was real? You don't think this is the - the interviews were received? (not audible)

THW: I think you have more - it's been my experience, and as a kid I grew up in Atlanta, as a kid the lower class white people and poorer Negroes had some sort of a common platform until the

higher-ups stirred them up. And I've seen that happen here since I've been here. I've been here thirty-five years. I've seen that happen here in the white population.

RPW: You're thinking then about the manipulation of race friction by sort of the upper people - the people in upper - power.

THW: Yes, and those same people want to make sure - I know one man who gave a great big gift just to get on the board of trustees of a certain Negro college in the South because he had to find out what those folks were doing. And the president of the school thought there was nobody like him, but his white friend, Dr. ~~Willard~~ Alexander, told me sitting on this porch over here one day about this story about how he got on the board, about how he went to that college president. And he says it's a man who doesn't talk very much but he wants to do something for Negro education and he's very far-sighted and, he said, I'm willing to bring you - for you to think about bringing him on your board. And meantime the gift was made, and the college president was so delighted. Now, that college president is still living and he and I are very good friends and I've told him about it and he said, I'll be doggoned, he said, you're just as right as you can be, he said, they tricked me in that. He said, I never knew it till now, he said, but that's the way it happened. I told him the story of how the approach was made and all that. He said, that's exactly the way it happened. He said, I never had the least idea that that was the purpose of it.

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RPW: That's interesting. I'm glad you told me that anecdote.

THW: I know some others. I know another - I know two other Negro colleges where the graduates have been rather militant, and the same thing happened in recent years.

RPW: That's not quite the question I originally put, though I'm glad we got this too. The question I originally put was this, that the more ignorant and oppressed Negroes find no possibility find no possibility, not in the white upper class or ruling group, but

more totally alienated than the white man. The higher you go among the educated Negroes - Negroes in responsible positions - or positions of leadership in general, the more confidence they have in some - the white society (talking together) justice of their claims.

THW: No, they have had to. They don't believe that by and large.

RPW: You mean the Negro leadership doesn't believe it.

THW: It hasn't since 1900 - about 1900 until - oh, in the '30's. There was nothing - no relief available. If you resisted the system - there were no Supreme Court decisions - on practically every important matter that we think about today in terms of freedom of movement and civil rights protection was a closed door, and the Negro leadership had to be very skillful. And it didn't dare express itself except in rare instances. It played the white leadership for all it was worth, and being very careful and very skillful, knowing that they had no redress.

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RPW: Does that same thing hold today?

THW: To some extent, yes, but not as -not nearly as (talking together).

RPW: I was thinking if you didn't believe that, though, that there is some possibility of an honest rapprochement with white society and recognition of the Negro's just claims - or the fact that his claims are just - put it that way - the Southern Regional Council would be a hollow mockery for you, wouldn't it?

THW: Well, that's a pretty good question to ask. And on this I don't think I'd want to be quoted too much.

RPW: You'll have the script.

THW: Our white friends, who are really doing a creditable job now - many of them would not have been willing to identify themselves with the Council seven or eight years ago.

RPW: Sure - things change.

THW: I know some people who would be very helpful who said they thought they ought not to become members - I mean, they couldn't even become members of the Council, and the Council was not participating in any activity. It was just doing the mildest sort of persuasion - if that. They were doing mostly study.

RPW: Yes, an educational angle.

THW: But we had an awful time keeping the racial balance in the Council.

RPW: You mean in getting enough white people?

THW: Yes. Now that consciences have become aware, there have

changes in many of these people. In addition, the climate has been - has made it easier. But there have been some fundamental changes in their thinking. It's not just that the climate is easier. And then all through this period we have had a handful of people who were - about whom there was never any question, and I could call their names - these are white people. But they were just a handful. And they were towers of strength in the kind of effort that we were putting on. They were not typical of the South. And when I say we had trouble, just maintaining the racial balance in a group of less than 75 people, you can see how difficult the problem has become.

RPW: Now here is a - some statements pretty current. One

Baldwin, not in his last book but in the one before that. He says that the Southern mob does not represent the will of the Southern people.

THW: I agree with him. I remember hearing, right after the Little Rock riots, the first ones, two Life magazine reporters talk about it around the luncheon table. And one of them said, before I knew it, I was chasing my buddy down the street as a part of the mob.

RPW: This Life reporter said that.

THW: Yes. In other words, there were two of them, and they smashed one of them's camera - the other one didn't have a camera - and then began to chase him. And the second one said, before I knew it - to show you how terrifying a thing like this can be and how you can be caught up in the hysteria of a mob, he said, before I knew it I was

chasing you down the street. And he said finally I stopped and said what am I doing?

RPW: The hypnosis of this mob action

Well, what about the people who were not there on the scene - who don't act - don't protest?

THW: The climate hasn't been right.

RPW: this in Mississippi. There are a number of people I know who - sick - sick at the stomach - who are isolated.

THW: We've got to tip the scales in any community. The scales have to be tipped for it to be feasible. And you don't go around blaming these people. You work to try to get the climate just a little bit better so that they'll have a chance to tip the scales on the positive side.

RPW: I was talking to Charles Evers last spring on a couple of occasions - and he said he was fairly optimistic about Mississippi.

THW: I think they've got to go through a number of stages.

RPW: How far along are they now (talking together)

THW: This I don't know, but - well, one in which they feel they've accomplished a great deal. They've got to reach a certain plateau and there would be another one, and then another one. Even the most aggressive people will sort of be heaving a sigh of relief when they reach a certain stage. I mean, this is my impression. Then the pressures will bring them to start the next one. But the

tempers may not be as great. It has been interesting in some of the things I've worked in to see how you work with the same group of people and the different ends of the table, and you're fighting just as hard on both sides but you get to the point where you get used to each other and it doesn't have the tension that it had the first time you squared away.

RPW: Are you talking about people on different sides of the question, or working together on the same side?

THW: No - people on opposite sides. I mean, at first there's this tension, and then you get to work at the problem and the next time you meet there's not as much tension. But you're not giving ground - neither side is giving any easier, but it's still a struggle but the tension lessens.

RPW: You mean some sort of floating - you might say a floating aggression just as it goes down - unfocused - sort of floating veil of aggression disappears and more and more on merits - is that it?

THW: That's right, but there's still a lot of determination on both sides. But it doesn't have the emotional pitch that it had in the beginning.

RPW: What do you think came out of the summer in Mississippi? Do you have any views about that?

THW: I think a very lasting - it will have a very lasting thing. Not only on Mississippi but the nation.

RPW: What about effects in Mississippi - you know that the actual



registration was low, but that could be predicted, obviously. That wasn't the point. What about the effect on the sort of uncommitted white Mississippians - sort of vague - you know, vaguely - there was no basic segregation but not violent - not hardcore.

THW: Well, I haven't spent any time in Mississippi. I have just passed through it. I know a great many people from Mississippi, and coupled with what they have to say and the history of the state in the last 60 years, some of these people have memories that are long enough to put them back into another situation where the racial problem was not as tense and where Negroes held office.

RPW: You mean back in the late Reconstruction period?

THW: Yes. Well, now - you see that Reconstruction period ran for a long time because I can recall when I was in college in the '20's, Perry Howard was a national committeeman from Mississippi, the Republican Party, and then there was a collector of customs at New Orleans who was a Negro.

RPW: He was Roosevelt's appointee - Teddy Roosevelt's appointee, wasn't he?

THW: Yes. I don't know why I can't think of his name right now, but -

RPW: I forget it too.

THW: - but the post - if you wanted to get a postmastership you had to see Perry Howard, and his name was very much revered in Mississippi. So that there are some people who shouldn't have too

much trouble adjusting. And then there were Negro businesses in every town, and very often I understand on the main street, where they got the whole market. And by the way, I can recall when I came to Durham that there were Negro merchants downtown, and they were frozen out with no chance to get back. But there are memories in Mississippi that can actually go back to this, when it was not a bad thing. Nobody was hurt by it.

RPW: Oh, sure - there's a synthetic element in the whole business - it was created arbitrarily in the late 19th century - early 20th century. (inaudible) people in his generation - my father's generation, remember that well, but -

THW: I'm going to - (interruption)

RPW: How did you interpret the little split between, see, on one hand Wilkins/King, and Young, and then Farmer and Lewis on the other - on the moratorium proposals just after the riots? How did you interpret that?

THW: Well, I wasn't part of the growing pains of an operation.

RPW: More specifically than that, how would you - how did you think about it - (not audible) -

THW: I would think so.

RPW: Keeping control of the wild boys and things in CORE - that's my guess too, what little I know -

(Telephone ringing - silence)      END OF TAPE