YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Farrell Race Relations Project

Personal Experiences

O. H. 758

DR. THEODORE L. YARBORO

Interviewed

by

Ronald Rice

on

July 2, 1981

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INTERVIEWEE: THEODORE YARBORO

INTERVIEWER: Ronald Rice

SUBJECT: NAACP, Urban League, black community, racial tensions

DATE: July 2, 1981

R: This is an interview with Dr. Theodore Yarboro for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program on Farrell Race Relations in the 1960's, by Ron Rice, at 755 Division Street, Sharon, Pennsylvania, on July 2, 1981, at 11:30 a.m.

Dr. Yarboro, could you tell us where you are from originally?

Y: Fayetteville, North Carolina.

R: You were born there?

Y: No. I was born in Rocky Mountain, North Carolina in 1932. I was raised in Fayetteville.

R: What do you remember most about your childhood?

Y: I had a very interesting childhood. I remember mostly about discrimination. It wasn't foremost in our minds though. The business at hand was to get an education. We enjoyed our lives in a separate manner without being too concerned about . . .

R: Did you go to high school in the same area?

Y: Yes.

R: When you graduated from high school where did you go from there?

Y: I went to Durham, North Carolina where I went to college, North Carolina College. It is now called North Carolina Central University.

R: You graduated from college when?

Y: In 1954. Then I went to graduate school after that at the same college and got my master's degree in 1956 in chemistry. From there I went to Morgantown, West Virginia where I worked at the Bureau of Mines as an analytical chemist for about three years. That was kind of broken up a little bit with a six month stay in the military. I was drafted and since I was working for the government they enabled me to go in the service for a six month program. I got to choose whichever branch of the service I wanted. Then I would stay in the reserves for seven and a half years as long as I would come back to my job. I did go into the Air Force in 1977 where I stayed for six months and then went back to my job in Morgantown.

R: What factors caused you to get into the medical field?

Y: I guess it dates back to high school. Very early in high school I decided I wanted to be a physician. I just can't put my finger on why I made that decision. There used to be a lot of medical books around the house and I never realized until later that my grandfather was involved in some form of medicine, sort of a quackery nature as people called it. He even had a drug company that he had cooperating and some of those medications were patented. I guess looking at those books and different things like that helped me make up my mind. I've pursued it ever since. I was delayed a little bit because I couldn't get into medical school when I applied in 1953, just before graduating from college.

R: So you finally went to medical school in what year?

Y: I went to Meharry Medical College in 1958.

R: And then you graduated from medical school?

Y: Yes, I graduated in 1963. Then I came here to Warren, Ohio where I did an internship at Trumbull Memorial Hospital. Following the internship I wanted to be in family practice again. One of the reasons is not really knowing too much about the other disciplines in medicine until I got into medical school. I wasn't quite sure; I thought maybe surgery, but later I decided that it would be family practice. I was a little bit afraid to go into a family practice after an internship so I decided to spend a year in a program that was called general practice at the time. They had one program here. They wanted to provide such a thing for me at Trumbull, but the thing was that they had residents in other fields: Surgery, pediatrics, and what have you, and what would have been just a repeat of internship because the residents would always do the big work and leave me to do the scud work; I didn't want that. Here they only had that residency program so I knew that if I would come here that I would really have a lot of responsibility of what I wanted. So I could really feel that I could do it if

I went out on my own. So I came and spent a year here in that program and decided to stay in Farrell.

R: How long have you been here?

Y: I came to the program in 1964 and went into practice in 1965.

R: What are some of your chief interests besides work?

Y: Even though segregation wasn't first and foremost in my mind I realized I was a victim of it. Maybe one of the things that probably stuck in my mind during the high school years was when Dwight D. Eisenhower came to town and they had a motorcade through town. They let everybody out of school and we had to go downtown and see him. As I think back over it the whites were cheering and the blacks just stood and looked at him. He had no real significance to us at that time. I've always known that I've been subjected to segregation. It has always bothered me, but we just went on living. It has always been something that I've thought about.

When I went into the military they took you through an indoctrination period where I saw a lot of propaganda, flag waving, and this kind of thing, bombs bursting, and the flags waving in that indoctrination period. They were talking about the freedom and whatnot. Of course, I cried because it affected me. I realized that they were talking about me. Then I finished the training program. With my uniform on I was being transferred to Langley Air Force Base in Hampton, Virginia. Two white fellows and I were being transferred; we were in the same troop. We were flying and had a layover in Dallas, Texas. We were coming from Blackman Air Force Base. We had a two or three hour layover We had a meal ticket, and we sat down at the airport to eat. They told them that if they were going to eat with me that they had to eat in the corner because I had to eat in the corner. I guess they were embarrassed by the fact, and, of course, they were upset about it that we had to eat in the corner. But I will never forget those things. One of my interests would be to try to do what I could to help blacks in our community, but these are what my interests stand for in Youngstown.

R: Moving up into the 1960's I'm sure segregation was a big part of your life. Can you remember what kind of impact some of the black minority leaders had on you such as Martin Luther King?

Y: Martin Luther King had a great impact on me. Before the 1960's I can recall listening to this man speak and watching him on television. I was much moved by what he would say and by the kinds of methods whereby he was using to try to use on the values. I was in Morgantown at that time. I can recall almost immediately going out organizing a group myself. Morgantown was in a county where maybe there were about 500 blacks in the whole county. Some blacks were going to school then, and we organized again to

deal with some of the problems--not in the same manner that Martin Luther King was doing. Some of the fellows didn't like that; they would rather be radical about it. I liked Martin Luther King's way. He impressed me with that. He was one of the ones who impressed me the most.

R: Did most of your friends and relatives feel pretty much the same way you did?

Y: My relatives . . . There were eight of us: My sisters, my brothers, my mother. Three of us were pretty close because there were two years between my brother who was older than me and one and a half years between my brother who was younger than me. So basically, the three brothers were it. I have since talked to a sister who was a schoolteacher at the time in a high school in Chicago and she did not feel the same way. She was more concerned about kids getting their decent education rather than the integration part. But I guess for the most part it may have varied. My older brother,one day I can recall him telling me, "I'll be going to school at the University of North Carolina to medical school." I thought that was a joke. I later applied and was in there then. So they had some concerns, but I wasn't that close with them during that time to be able to tell you just how they felt.

R: What can you recall about some of the racial rioting in other American cities throughout the 1960's?

Y: Well, I don't know how to . . .

R: During that time you were living here in Sharon?

Y: Right. One thing that I can recall was how amazing it was, of course, that these concerns were concerns here too even though on a smaller scale because of the riots that were happening in the big cities. We realized that these concerns were of need to be addressed here. Immediately when I came here in 1964 I right away became affiliated with the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) and with a church. With the NAACP you try to increase the membership. As we talked to some of the blacks like in Greenville where they are right now, there may be two or three black families; at that time there were probably no more than five or six going about their education. We talked to them and they had no problems as far as they were concerned. Occasionally, we would try to beef up the membership because we could see these problems happening all over the country in the different riots. We tried to beef up the NAACP membership. I remember talking to a woman, and she told me that she was half Indian which is kind of interesting. She was black but she was half Indian also so she didn't feel that these problems were her problems.

I tend to recall that we were trying to stress to the people

that even though we were not in a riot situation, these things were happening in the country and we had concerns. Those people here who were saying that they were the first blacks to do certain things had to realize that they were the first blacks to do it here; some of these things were being done in other places, ten, fifteen years before; they were behind and it was not to be proud of. Then we had concerns. The NAACP felt that we needed an office in order to be more effective. It was difficult to get money, and we found the Urban League was the instrument that could help us with this kind of thing because money could come from the United Way. The rioting in the other cities and then the ultimate death of Martin Luther King, all of that was used to make a presentation to the United Way. Just two months after we organized we were accepted into the United Way. So it had an impact on what we were doing here and concerns. People here had the same kind of concerns, the whites too. We felt that something should be done. So that was one way the rioting kind of helped us. It formed in people's minds what some of the problems were, and it did help to gradually organize certain bodies and particular,the Urban League. We didn't have too much of that here, a little bit of skirmishes here and there during some summers, but it really didn't do too much.

R: How did you receive most of your information about rioting or racial residencies?

Y: From the news media, television, radio, newspapers, and magazines. At that time I was not intimidated with these and not that tactic with the Urban League.

R: During the 1960's did you sense any growing racial tensions in Farrell?

Y: Yes. We had some concerns about the fact that we had no one in politics to help speak for the people, a majority of the blacks involved,and the school boards. We realized that we had no input and so that was a concern. One time we even had some picketing. We were allowed by the state to expand the school boards. We picketed. We wanted to be able to get a black appointed to one of those positions because we realized that we needed to have someone in one of the positions and black schoolteachers. We were concerned and gradually we could see that this was creating problems. We realized that jobs were not there, and the jobs that were there many people were underemployed. So gradually, yes, we could see it developing.

R: Do you think what happened in Farrell--I think it was in 1969--was a result of any type of domino effect throughout the country like some people feel?

Y: I would think so.

R: Just spreading across the country. Was your life or any of your family's life ever affected by any racial tension or violence in Farrell?

Y: Not affected in terms of depth.

R: Let's say, for example, at work or at school or in your neighborhood, are there any specific examples of racial prejudice or violence directed towards you or any members of your family?

Y: No, none at all to my knowledge, none whatsoever. A result to what, just being here?

R: Just being here and being involved with the NAACP.

Y: No.

R: Do you know any of your friends that were directly affected by any of this?

Y: Not so much as being involved. We had no place. A person would come home and have no property to live. There was a paving contractor. He talked about the time that people would paint KKK (Ku Klux Klan) on his big, heavy equipment.

R: When he would be on jobs at night?

Y: Yes, on jobs. But I never have had any probelms, not that way.

R: Can you recall anything about some of the damages done to the Farrell businesses such as Pick Electric or Myer Frank Furniture?

Y: No, I can't. I just can't remember what all did take place. There were some broken windows and stuff like that. There wasn't, as I said, anything major, but I noticed some broken windows. A lot of black kids were roaminig the streets and this kind of thing, but I myself can't say what damages.

R: Would you label what happened in Farrell during the summer of 1969 as a riot?

Y: Not really.

R: You don't think so?

Y: I call it a skirmish, just an unrest with the kids.

R: It was a hot summer.

Y: Yes. I wouldn't call it a riot.

R: Can you recall much anything about the Black Youth Action Committee?

Y: Some things. In what way?

R: Maybe what their demands were to the city. I think that Bill Sand was in it; Jeanie Thomas was in it, Roger Winston.

Y: Yes, yes. I guess some things. Of course, they were more of a militant group. I guess that is about as much as I can say. They would tell you just as much as I could tell you. They were more of a militant group and felt that they had the ears. The people in their peer group were the younger set, in their twenties primarily, and so they felt that their concerns and their demands were unlike our concerns and our demands and that we who were over thirty--of course, that was the problem; we were over thirty--really didn't speak their concerns. They felt many times that some of the ways that we approached things were not being noticed. They used a more direct approach. I can recall sitting in a meeting with them. It was at an NAACP meeting. Of course, how they blasted the NAACP--about this type and this concern for all the blacks going on and on--we really weren't impressed in the least.

R: How do you think the Sharon Herald reported events in Farrell during the 1960's? Do you think they were fair and biased?

Y: I can't really answer that. I do know from time to time that the Sharon Herald plays up a certain, what you might call, sensationalism. Sometimes when they write a headline, the headline implies something different from what is in the story, what the story is all about. Sometimes that could create problems that it didn't need to create. There were concerns during these times of people who were troubled about what possibly would happen. There were a lot of rumors in other words that were going on rather than things that one really found. I think the Sharon Herald got a little bit involved in that kind of stuff too and put their implication on it. But I can't say just specifically about this.

R: How do you feel the Farrell police dealt with all the racial problems Farrell had?

Y: I probably can't answer that. Somebody like Walter Mathews probably could answer that a lot better than I can because he would go out on the streets with the young people. He would acutally see. Sometimes it seemed that the police reacted very badly to a lot of situations. But I can't give you any specifics.

R: They weren't really prepared to deal with it?

Y: Yes.

R: How about the Farrell city government? How do you feel they handled the situation? I don't think there were any blacks at that time on city council.

Y: No.

R: Several people were quite upset about the voting at large in representation. Do you feel that they could have done anything to better the situation?

Y: Well, here again I don't think that I could really put forth an answer. We had the Urban League at that time. I never got the feeling that they understood what it was all about. It was still like a unilateral thing. They could come in and they would talk with us about black problems per say.

I have always contended that these are community problems and it just seems to be hard to get some people to understand that what we are talking about is the community and not just blacks and black issues. You have to separate Farrell,for instance--where most of the blacks live--from Sharon? They are just across the street. How are you going to separate that from the full Shenango Valley? Most of those people who live out that way have to go across that way to go to work to get to Sharon Steel and places like that. It just bothered me that many times the people who are in a position to be able to do something don't look at it as a total community problem; they just look at it basically as a black problem and then go ahead and try to deal with it, what they can call black solutions. That is the one thing that always bothered me.

I can recall meeting with some big leaders in the community. We would discuss some of our concerns at that time. This was in the late 1960's; this was during the time that the kids were in trouble. The one white leader said, "We talk about a lot of negative things," because we talked about the problems that seemed to have developed as a result of these things in the past. "We need to talk more about good things. Right now there is a group of black kids out on my property having a picnic. See, that is a good thing." That is what they talked about. But at the same time there were some black orphans over in Philadelphia who were trying to get into the school in Girard for orphans and couldn't. That is what we need, not a place to have a picnic. I'm saying that that was the kind of mentality that was there.

We go to school together; we have always gone to school together, black and white. But education doesn't begin or stop in school. That is what they would say. They said, "Well, hell we went to school together. The chances were there. We had equal opportunities. They went to the same school I did. They

had the same chance I had. Why don't we just forget the past and go from here?" How in the hell can you forget the past and go from here when the past is part of where you are now. Where you are now has a lot to do with where you go in the future. That is the kind of mentality. And you find that mentality everywhere, with the government, with the police, with what leaders they had, the United Way. They supported the Urban League but whether they helped the blacks and provided something for the blacks . . . Our program downstairs is an Urban League program, and we serve more whites than we do blacks.

R: Sounds like they were trying to give you segregated help too?

Y: Right. What I'm trying to say is that you don't deal with it that way; this is a community problem. If we would look at it that way, then all of us would be better off if the lowest of us is alright.

R: Was there any single group you feel that was responsible for all the racial unrest in Farrell? Some people believe that troublemakers would bust in and such.

Y: I never felt that anybody came in from the outside, not any significant people. I think the unrest they may have had may have come a lot from the Black Youth Action Committee because, as I said, they were a militant group. I'm not saying that they don't feel that they ever had reason to be because sometimes you use different approaches, but they were a militant group. I think most of it extended from that.

R: With your involvement in the NAACP and the Urban League, can you recall any specific examples of actual racial prejudices in Farrell during the 1960's, say, for example, in real estate or jobs?

Y: Not so much in Farrell. Just looking at the census--we had to do some reports for our Urban League director; trying to get some information for him--all of the blacks lived in one area. Of course, we have to assume that was in some way discrimination.

R: Sort of red lining?

Y: Yes, yes, very definitely that. We were doing some information on census tracks and stuff like that. I was getting some stuff together for a purpose. Most of the blacks lived in the poor section tracks, in the tracks that were very, very poor and the houses were built a long, long time ago. That in itself, in my mind, has to agree with discrimination. When Dr. Lowe, in the late 1950's and early 1960's, tried to buy his house the committee tried to stop that. We were looking at some deeds at the courthouse that were put into the record in the mid-1950's that said

outright that no minorities--blacks--are permitted to buy these properties or live on these properties unless they are servants. That was in deeds that were registered as recent as the 1950's. I saw some of these. They were mostly out in Hermitage; those deeds were there. Of course, we realized these problems.

When I came here Westinghouse may have been hiring close to 5000 people. This was gradually decreasing. Less that 125 of those people were blacks.

R: Out of 5000?

Y: Yes, and of all those blacks most of them were underemployed. I don't want to say most--many of them were underemployed. They had one or two years of college. Some of them since have left Westinghouse and gone to other places and became foremen. That was a real problem. There were areas of employment even at Sharon Steel that blacks couldn't get into. Some of the ones were good paying jobs, so they got into some of the dirtier places. That was rampant.

R: So that was brought to the attention of the Urban League?

Y: Yes, oh definitely to the Urban League and the Chamber of Commerce. The Chamber of Commerce at that time would have town meetings to try to discuss this. As a matter of fact, I talked about the mentality; we would have town meetings all over the valley. We would go to this community and to that community and have town meetings. They would say such things as, "We don't have anybody on the fire department in Sharon," of course, meaning black. But it is open to blacks and whites. They can go apply just like anybody else. But people have to understand that where there have been a lot of years where there has been some sort of segregation, you have to be a little more aggressive with your approach. Just to open up the legislation and say that everybody can come sometimes is not enough. You have to go out and get somebody and put him in there and let people see that you are going to mean business. Some of the apprenticeship unions said the same thing--We'll take blacks now in our apprenticeship programs in carpentry and so on. But their history is that they never did. Now they just feel that opening more fields in enrollment is adequate to get more blacks to apply and say, "Well, if they want to apply, there is nothing I can do."

R: It seems like a lot of things are hidden behind the old "ifs." If qualified to . . .

Y: Yes, sure I was schooled different. Sharon says that we don't have any qualified applicants to hire [teachers]. For instance, they maybe had one or two when it started and maybe three or four now, but they are all cutting back; they are cutting back on those teachers just this year. Now I think

they have only one black teacher in that whole system. They won't cut this one black because they feel that everybody should be created equal but at the same time blacks were not equally given the opportunities that were given to them [whites].

R: Looking back at the 1960's and some of the unrest in the Shenango Valley and in Farrell in particular,what changes would you have liked to seen instituted perhaps to better the situation?

Y: Well, I surely would like to see more efforts geared toward giving people equal job opportunities and then certainly upgrading jobs. That is one change for sure that I would have liked to have seen. During what time?

R: During the 1960's. What could have been done then perhaps to make things better than what they were?

Y: More job opportunities and actually more of an affirmative approach towards trying to get minorities in work areas where they were not. Another would be better housing, better housing for the minority. There was, as I said, red lining. Even myself when I applied for a loan in order to build our house, I was told that I should rent. In 1965 just before I went into practice, I was still in the program here and I had decided to stay. I decided in November of 1964 that I was going to stay. So I was then practicing in an office and needed a place to live. I was looking for little properties but then as I talked to people, when you start paying this rent you have more of a bill. So I thought about that and thought that it made sense to me, if I could get a lot. We got a lot. Then we tried to get the financing; the guy was trying to get the financing and he was having problems. That year I was in the position past my internship. They asked me about how much I would make. He said, "Approximately what will be your income when you start practicing?" I didn't know; I didn't have any idea. He asked me some other things, and I said, "I can't answer those questions." He said, "Really, I think it would be better for you if you rent for a while and then you come back and we will talk finances." At that very moment the little money I was making as a resident and with my wife working at the time, I could have paid that just right then and there and the loan was $96,000, $96,000 then to build on that lot.

Education, if we could have gotten more black people and counselors to help with the kids,that would have helped. Most of these areas would have helped a lot.

R: Do you think things such as more recreation facilities for some of the younger blacks in Farrell could have possibly prevented things that developed, that they needed more playgrounds for younger kids, more recreation facilities because there wasn't really anything to do in Farrell?

Y: Well, maybe yes and maybe no. I think that most of us concerned realized that there was not a lot to do. I feel so, first and foremost, because sometimes if you got these other things, then hopefully you can have a better home. People with better home lives usually are fine then.

R: Basically then the root of the problem is economic?

Y: Right.

R: Do you think the racial problems that Farrell had were inevitable?

Y: Yes, they were.

R: How different are race relations in Farrell today in that area compared to what they were in the 1960's?

Y: Really not that much different. Probably pretty much the same. Just a little different in the type of things, but there is still not that much difference. The educational level of the community hasn't increased that much as far as I'm concerned. I think that is the key in trying to help integrate anybody. I don't think the help has been that great. We experience a lot of younger people who are finishing school with their diplomas who really can't read and write. So I'm saying that is the drawback; that is really a retroblessing. I don't see that. I still don't see that much home ownership. Of course, you would see that everything is going up. I know we built again in the 1970's, and the fellows were saving all their wages because the interest rates were so high. They are even higher now than they were then; so they have never stopped. I guess that has been a deterrent, so we haven't been able to get money,I guess,for that. As far as being the kinds of jobs that would help them, besides a few people who are in the supervising, the fact is that there are not enough to say that they have made an impact.

R: Do you think things could happen again the way they did in the 1960's?

Y: No, I don't,because a lot has to do with the way the country is trying to deal with the problems. The way the country is trying to deal with the problems now--you take this back to maybe even before the 1960's--is accepted now it seems. So I don't think . . . I think that what will happen now requires new strategies, and I think that many of the blacks probably think it is a good thing to think up different strategies.

R: How do you feel the racial problems in Farrell during the 1960's has affected the reputation of the city overall, in the city in the greater Shenango Valley?

Y: Not at all. Well, I think that in terms of the city in all and I hear the blacks even say it sometimes too--Why do you keep people in Farrell? I think one of the effects there have been on the city of Farrell, in terms of how the other communities view it, really depends a lot on something else, a lot on the ethnic actually, the ethnicity of our community. We have a lot of Italians and whatnot. I think we have a lot of this in general and so the White Anglo-Saxon Protestants . . .

R: Farrell has all these WASP's.

Y: Yes. They would always view the community pretty much like how they always viewed it. So I don't think that the racial aspect has too much to do with the community.

R: Well, is there anything else important you would like to discuss that we didn't cover?

Y: No, I don't think. You have asked me as much as I think I should answer in light of the nature and that I can be sure of. I think that is about all I can think of.

R: Okay, thank you. I really appreciate it.

END OF INTERVIEW