

**TAPE TRANSCRIPT**  
**Durham Civil Rights Heritage Project**  
**Center for Documentary Studies, Durham, NC**

**Interviewee:** Charles Leslie  
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Additional address:??  
311 Town and Country  
Durham, NC

**Interviewer:** Will Atwater  
c/o Center for Documentary  
1317 West Pettigrew St.  
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**Place:** St. Joseph's AME Church  
2521 Fayetteville Street  
Durham, NC 27707

**Equipment:** SONY MZ-R700 Minidisk  
Sony microphone ECM-907

**Tape:** SONY MD-80 Tape

**Date:** January 19, 2004

**Description of Interviewees:**

**Circumstances of the Interview:**

**Will Atwater:** Can we just start by you stating who you are?

**Charles Leslie:** Charles B. Leslie. 311 Town and Country Avenue, Durham, North Carolina.

**WA:** Can you talk a little bit about the artifact that you brought in today? Why is it important to you?

**CL:** Well, I got that button back in the '60s. I collected buttons. I had a whole lot of buttons, and somebody just stole them. I had all kinds of buttons. Cause back in the '60s, I would march for Martin Luther King in the demonstration in Durham, and all over the country. We'd just get on buses to go to Washington to march on Washington. And I was one of the first ones always at the meetings when ( ) organizing to get on the buses and stuff.

**WA:** Can you back up for second, and describe what it is that you brought in?

**CL:** A picture of Martin Luther King with some writing on it.

**WA:** And so you just said that you were one of the first to meet him?

**CL:** I met him during the march during the '60s, and the marches in North Carolina and South Carolina and Georgia.

**WA:** Can you describe what that was like, meeting Mr. King?

**CL:** Oh, my. It was marvelous. We went to jail in ( ). Well, he wasn't in the marches in Durham, but he was in other marches that we went to Washington DC, the march on Washington. Matter of fact, I made two trips to Washington. I was a young man at that time. Young people don't understand about the marches ( ) cities and the bus rides and stuff like that. I participated in that. It was real nice to be participating in those activities. What got me involved, I was seeing everybody going to the meetings. I said, "Where you all going?" They said, "We're going to march." I said, "I'm going too." My mom said, "Where you going?" I said, "I'm going on the march with them too." So I went with them. I went to jail with them. We went to jail, got out on bond and stuff. ( ) It was real nice. Back then, we didn't have no money. We had to chip in what we had to get on the buses. Some organizations got paid for that stuff. And this organization that we meet today to have our luncheon , I'm a part of that. I help do the finances.

**WA:** What's the name of that organization?

**CL:** The Civil Rights Committee.

**WA:** So how long have you had that pin that you brought in today, and why is it important to you?

**CL:** That pin would be like 37 years old or more. But I kept it clean and everything. I had one when I was first--with the other buttons but somebody stole that. Would have had 40 years of it.

**WA:** Why is that pin important to you?

**CL:** Because he was a great man. And back then, it was worth having something to remember him by on this day. You know, cause people don't remember--a lot of people go to work on that day. I don't go to work on that day. Some people go to work on that day, but I wouldn't.

Because it's the atmosphere of what he was talking about, freedom. And that helps. I think it's nice what y'all are doing with this collecting stuff to keep it as a--

**WA:** During your time in the movement as a young man, do you have a specific event or story that really sticks out that you'd like to share?

**CL:** Well, as a young man I was always up front, toting the banner. I always toted the banner in the marches and stuff. I was up front with most of the leaders. I was part of the organization. Back then the NAACP and ( ) was in charge of it. We met at the old Saint Joseph historical building, when it was the old Saint Joe was in the basement. But we'd go to different people's houses to have meetings as an organization.

**WA:** Who were some of the leaders in the community?

**CL:** I can't tell you, cause that goes so far back. Ben Ruffin was one of them. Clem Baines, he was a part of it. John Edwards was a part of it. Mr. R. Kenneth Brandt was a part of it. And we are having some people, a lot of people have died away. The deaths--one lady, I told that lady that she ( ) Josephine Turner, she could tell her everything that went on. I mean, she got every kind of button that you could name. She got a hat made up of buttons. I was hoping she'd be here today. I don't know if ( ) with her or not.

**WA:** Could you talk about some of the people that you looked up to or respected during--

**CL:** Well, John Edwards, Leo Bell was just a mayor. He'd go back there, he would help too. And there was a whole lot of people, must have been a whole lot of people, but the man named Mr. Louis Alston used to be a part of it. He died away. You see, now I could go back to the history of Hayti, because I was raised up in the Hayti community, where ( ), where people get killed and everything. And back then, it was rough. ( ) I can go back to those days and remember some of the stuff ( ). I used to have copies of the papers of all the marches. I looked and I looked, and somebody stole all my stuff away. I tried to keep up ( ) years and years, I kept up till about 15 years ago, and then ( ).

**WA:** You said earlier that you think that collecting this information, these oral histories, is very important. Why do you think it's important?

**CL:** Because we need someone to do the history on the background. Not only in this community, go out into the neighborhoods and find out the people that used to be a part of this stuff, and can answer questions.

**WA:** So you were saying earlier, people that you respected and looked up to that were important in the movement were people like Ben Ruffin and folks like that.

**CL:** Right. Yeah. They would help me, make sure that I got on the bus and stuff like that. Make sure that I was capable of doing things with the committee.

**WA:** Can you talk a little bit about how you think Durham has changed over the years since the civil rights movement?

**CL:** Yeah, see, I could tell you, Durham has changed a whole lot, because back then we didn't have no school buses. We had to walk to school, you know, take a lunch to school. We didn't ride no buses, we walked to school, and we got in fights and the police department was more separated than it is now. It wasn't a whole lot of fighting going on and shooting and stuff going on in the community, like it is now. It wasn't a lot of drugs going on in the community like it is now. And the churches was more responding to the organizations than it is now. Because we couldn't get leaders to come out to the mass meetings and stuff, unless we'd go out, pass out leaflets and stuff. And get involved in voting registration and stuff like that.

**WA:** What do you think has changed to cause Durham to be in the situation it's in?

**CL:** The civil rights organization. And people participating, like me and other people. You had some whites that came out to help us a whole lot to get ( ) lawyers, a lot of lawyers that helped us that way.

**WA:** So what do you think would make Durham--what needs to happen to make Durham a better community?

**CL:** Get rid of the drugs. A better police department. That's what I think, now, I mean other people might say something different, but that's what I think. But by me being ( ), but by me being 56, I've seen a whole lot going on. A whole lot of my friends have got killed, shot, in jail. Was in the movement. So that ( ).

**WA:** Do you think there needs to be a new movement?

**CL:** Well, it don't need to be a new movement, it just needs to be just something to do now, the history of the movements and stuff, need to be done and be publicized. TV needs to publicize it. People need to know the history of the organizations, where they're coming up today. Because young people really don't know what's going on. Whole lot of young people said what's happening. What's happening today? I said, we're having a speaker, we're having a lunch, and we're having a nice time to celebrate a man that did something for us as a black person. You know what I'm saying? When they called me, and asked me did I want to do an interview, I didn't mind doing it because we deserve it.

**WA:** Do you think the leaders--are the leaders that we have today, are they--how do they compare with the leaders from--

**CL:** Oh, they ain't like the ones we used to have. They're a whole lot different. They're more financial ( ). Well, back then we had a whole lot of finance people come in and help us. You'll see today, if you're around, the people that come to this meeting that we're having today, you'll see a whole lot of people that were back in the '60s and the '70s, right there back in the days. And always still part of the organization. That's why we call this a reunion.

**WA:** And how long has this reunion having been taking place?

**CL:** This is the fifteenth year. To my knowledge. And I've been a part of it. I usually set up the tables and stuff, but today, by me just getting out of the hospital sick, they did somebody else to do it for me this time.

**WA:** Do you have any special memories of certain reunions over the past 15 years that stand out?

**CL:** Well, yeah, I just get to see some of the people that I marched with and talked to, and we shared rooms at hotels and different things, and we walked together and stuff. It's just like a--like you're going to your class reunion. It's just like a class reunion. We just come together and fellowship.

**WA:** You said earlier that when you were involved in the movement as a younger person, on a couple of trips you took, you were involved in a march to Washington?

**CL:** Washington DC. The march on Washington, yeah.

**WA:** Can you talk a little bit about that experience?

**CL:** Yeah. We left Durham at 5 or 6:00 in the--12:01 at night, and arrived in Washington at 8:05, cause we stopped and eat and we had buses--we saw buses from everywhere. We got off

the bus and we got our name tags, and I was one of the leaders from Durham that marched with the organization. We got close up front, cause we were a part of the organization--program.

And I got a chance to see the president, stuff like that. Something I never did before, you know.

**WA:** Who was the president at that time, do you remember?

**CL:** I can't remember.

**WA:** Can you remember--what time of the year was that when you marched?

**CL:** It was in the summertime. I mean, it was almost cold, but it was real nice. The weather was real nice. Oh, the march was a long ( ), long march. We stayed there for a couple days ( ). Real nice. I enjoyed the trip. Some people didn't want me to go, I said, "I'm going." I got on the bus anyhow, I made my way on the bus. ( ) we need you, ( ) said you come on, go with us.

**WA:** Why didn't they want you to go?

**CL:** I didn't know why they didn't want me to go. But I fixed it so I could go on.

**WA:** Do you think they were concerned for your safety, or--

**CL:** Yes, safety, that's what it was.

**WA:** What were some of the issues around safety at that time?

**CL:** Make sure you got the clothes and the shoes and stuff, able to march and stuff and ( ) stuff to people.

**WA:** You had to have--

**CL:** Be clean, jeans and stuff. At that time, we were marching, it was a lot of young folks. We were young, we were real young. We didn't know what we were doing. We were just getting involved with something. I'll never forget one evening, we had all night long at the old St. Joseph's ( ). We had meetings and people would bring us food in, we'd stay up making plans for different organizations. Going to different places, marches and stuff. So what I'm really saying is that so much of the history of the organization in the community have got better, because back then the projects weren't the projects, not like they is now. It was so much trouble in the projects. Fighting and children and stuff, and killing and stuff. And see, people don't realize, if you take a life, you just took a life. And you don't need to take nobody's life.

**WA:** So, do you miss those times?

**CL:** In a way, I miss those times, but as I'm getting older, I remember the days that we used to do that, fellowship, and eating the cold simple bologna sandwich and cold cuts and you know, a can of ( ). That carried you a long ways. People don't realize, when we were going to school,

we had to take a brown bag, pinto beans or a biscuit or something. Them kids don't know about that peanut butter and jelly sandwich you had to take. Had to come home and cut up wood and stuff. Make a fire. People don't know anything about that stuff. Potbelly stoves and stuff. And the preachers would do it, a whole lot of preachers got involved. And some of the city leaders would get involved. But they wouldn't get involved when we'd get out there in the street marching from one place downtown back to Woolworth's and all down through there, getting the hose pipes and stuff set on us. ( )

**WA:** So you had that experience in Durham?

**CL:** Yes, sir. I had the water put on me, yes, sir.

**WA:** Can you--I don't have but a few more questions, but can you tell me a little bit about what that was like?

**CL:** It was really ( ), cause you never know if that's gonna--. The water, you didn't know when the fire department was going to put the water on you, so we'd get up town in front of the courthouse, and they'd come with the water guns and stuff. But it didn't hurt us. And ( ) a whole lot of stuff, we got a whole lot accomplished by going to city hall, ( ) stuff, getting stuff passed and stuff.

**WA:** So why were they using water?

**CL:** To try to scare us off. It didn't scare us off. It didn't hurt us. And they couldn't put all of us in jail at one time anyhow. They overcrowded the jails.

**WA:** How many times did you get arrested?

**CL:** Never. I got lucky. Because right down in front, they would get the people that's making all the noise, for ( ). Most of the people in the march were ( ). They were getting the people that was ( ) the marchers.

**WA:** Were you ever afraid during that time?

**CL:** I wasn't afraid. If I was afraid, I would have stayed at home.

**WA:** Where do you think you got your courage from?

**CL:** Looking up to the Lord. Looking up to Jesus. ( ), ( ) march today just like I would back then, because that's something that I was brought up on.

**WA:** So you feel like you had good support, good mentors? Is there one person that sticks out in your mind as a person who was a good role model or a good mentor during that time?

**CL:** John ( ). And Ben Ruffin.

**WA:** What was special about those two?

**CL:** They showed me what to do. They kind of helped me go along. And some people don't realize, back then as kids, we wore a pair of sneakers, that's all we had, to march. And they'd tell you what your job was and what you did in the march. And you don't talk about--you know, you'd try to go along with the organization, our leaders ( ).

**WA:** Does Durham have strong leadership like that today?

**CL:** Yeah, they got a good strong leadership. Not as strong as back in them days, cause most of those people died of old age and stuff. Lucky I'm still here, because I was supposed to have been dead. I was shot ( ) five times, but not by going to marches.

**WA:** Recently?

**CL:** No, this was about--when I was young. I mean, I didn't get shot, like shot, but bullets went over my head and stuff. And I just prayed to the Lord.

**WA:** So you didn't actually get hit, but you were in a vicinity of where--

**CL:** Yeah. Where are you from?

**WA:** Carrboro.

**CL:** Oh, I've been to Carrboro and Chapel Hill, yeah. Well, I've really enjoyed meeting you.

**WA:** Okay.

**CL:** ( )

**WA:** Sure. Well, before we close, is there any other thing that you think is important for people to know about the movement or about you?

**CL:** Well, if ( ) out there, you'll see a whole lot of speakers come in and tell more about the organization. You know, keep people that's in the communities now.

**WA:** So, are you a mentor for anyone today? Any young people?

**CL:** Today? I got one job to do, help take up the money. And do security. That's all.

**WA:** But I mean, in the community.

**CL:** Oh, yeah, a whole lot of people look to me, because I help people in the community. I don't have a separate job, I don't have a title, I just help people in the community.

**WA:** What kind of things do you help them with?

**CL:** I've got people that, like somebody die in the community, I go and help them. Serve the family. I go to the store for old people and stuff like that.

**WA:** Well, thank you.

**WA:** This is Will Atwater, I am at St. Joseph's AME Church. This is January 19, 2004. This event that's going on today is the Civil Rights Heritage Project, and I just interviewed Mr. Charles Leslie.

END OF TAPE