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MARSHALL UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

"CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT"

With Marion T. "Bunche" Gray

By Jackie Fourie

April 25, 1996

Transcribed & Typed by Gina Kehali Kates

Jackie: My name is Jackie Fourie, and I will be interviewing Bunche Gray of 1739 9th Avenue, Huntington, WV, 25701, for the Oral History of Appalachia Project and Drinko Foundation, on the effects of the civil rights movement. Today is April 25th, 1996. First I would like to get Bunche Gray's permission to publish or transcribe tapes and transcripts for public domain?

Bunche: Yes.

Jackie: Thank you. Okay, today we're going to focus on the effects of the civil rights era with Marion T. Gray (Bunche Gray) Bunche Gray, known as Bunche Gray. First of all, Bunche, I'm just curious, in the 1960's what kind of organizations were you belonging to, or what organizations did you belong to in the civil rights era?

Bunche: NAACP. (okay) National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. That was the main one, but I belonged to many others. The League of Women Voters...

Jackie: The other one was called Legal...

Bunche: The League of Women Voters.

Jackie: Okay, League of Women Voters, great. And your participation in the groups, what kind of involvement...?

Bunche: Well, I was pretty busy.

Jackie: Yes, active, okay. Also, there's, the media, too, in the civil rights as you know down in the South is very destructive at times, with the sit-in's and things like that. Media coverage, was it covered very well here in West, in Huntington?

Bunche: Some times. (some things weren't all) Some things not so well.

Jackie: Right. Okay. Like how did it affect your family life when, in the 1960's when this was going on and things like that?

Bunche: Well, let's see. How shall I put it? (yes) I had to make up my mind whether or not it was the thing to do. And I felt

profoundly that if I didn't, nobody else would. (right) But consequently, I tried to stick with it. It was so important.

Jackie: Because your husband at the time, was he working?

Bunche: Yes, he was working for Jim's. [referring to Jim's Steak & Spaghetti House]

Jackie: Okay, and still today as manager. Okay. Also, what's your worst experience that you can remember from the civil rights era, of an incident, how people treated you...?

Bunche: I think possibly what could have happened. One year, I can't remember the year, let's see.... I had even some of the news media to call me and ask me about these people coming in to town. And the trouble-makers coming in to town. And I said, "What the hell would they be coming into Huntington for?" Nothing was going on in Huntington. However, they had the police up on 29th Street, a lot of police cars, and they, because word had gotten out that they were coming through the 29th Street entrance. And one of the ladies called me who happened to be black, and she said, "Bunche, we were told to come to your house, because there's going to be a riot." I said, "Well, who told you?" And, and of course, it was another black person. But everybody was talking about the riot. I said, "Just think about that. All these people are white. If we're going to riot, would we be going around telling white people we were gonna riot?" [chuckles] The whole thing was ridiculous. But at any rate, it was out that there was going to be a riot. And this lady, another lady who called me, and she had the lady she worked for had told her to come to her house. Come in a taxi because she didn't want her to come on the bus because the neighbors would see her and get concerned. [phone ringing in background-tape stops and re-starts]

Jackie: And you were...

Bunche: And so, she told me. And she was really scared. And she said, "Bunche, what are you doing now?" And I said, "Honey, I'm down on the floor working on my articles." She said, "You're not afraid?" I said, "No, ma'am. There's nothing to be afraid of." And then when I thought about it later, I said this was a trying time, really and truly. Because somebody had plans for the whole black neighborhood to erupt. Wild...somebody had plans.

Jackie: Was this in the 1960's, of course?

Bunche: Uh-huh. And boy, when you think about it, it's scary. And the newspaper, I have an article that talked about the boomers. And just didn't happen. And I think if we hadn't hounded in the manner that we did, it would have happened. No telling how many people would have been involved. (right)

Jackie: I understand also there was the restaurants, Bailey's and the White Pantry.

Bunche: White Pantry, yeah, we had a thing going with them, too. No service. (right) No service.

Jackie: But I heard, which one was it that, Bailey's, that was awfully, the roaches, the bugs in the windows?

Bunche: Oh, that must have been White Pantry.

Jackie: So who would want to eat there, right? But the law of the churches. What would you say about the role of the churches?

Bunche: I would say that the churches were very supportive. Especially First Baptist. Because we had down at First Baptist Reverend Charles A. Smith was one of the leaders. He was truly a leader. And consequently, the churches were mostly involved.

Jackie: Right, oh, definitely. I got a lot of positive on that because you know, that actually, the church and the other

organizations were involved were the resources for mobilization to fight the movement.

Bunche: Oh, yeah.

Jackie: Organizations in Huntington was of course, the NAACP, okay. Your involvement was just heavy...you were involved in it though, NAACP, and involved also in the Woman's, you talked about the...

Bunche: The Women's Voter's League. That's not the name. League of Women Voter's.

Jackie: The League of Women Voter's.

Bunche: The League of Women Voter's, mmm-hmm.

Jackie: And did they, did they, what exactly did you do in your organization? Try to get more women...?

Bunche: Well, at one time I was secretary of the NAACP. (okay) That was rather a trying time. And we really had a job to do. At the time we had lots of members in the NAACP. And all we had to do.... And something else happened around about that time, if I remember correctly. Oh, a man, black man was in a liquor store, and a white man wanted his spot, I believe it was. And there was an argument. And this white man slapped this black man. The black man didn't say a word. He just went home and he came back with a gun and blew him to hell! (wow) And so at that time, now, death...we could almost smell it. But the main thing with this, we had to really come together on something, that this man was protecting himself. And so I was chairman of the committee, to raise money for a lawyer for this man. And he, he got some time in prison.

Jackie: Right, hard time. Counter movements, you were talking about the riots you know, that was supposed to occur. Did they

have organizations with the Huntington counter movements? You know the white supremists, the Klu Klux Klan? They had tough organizations in Huntington, or did they have any counter movements that you knew of that was in this area?

Bunche: I don't...I don't recall any. But I do, do recall that there was a whole lot of ignorance. A whole lot of ignorance about it, really. Am I my brother's keeper? That was the main thing. A lot of us didn't think we were.

Jackie: War on poverty, at that time. That was a very big issue. They had programs for people to have access to commodities in Huntington.

Bunche: And information, too.

Jackie: Excuse me?

Bunche: And information, access to information, too.

(okay, great) Because there was a war on poverty that really made us know that we could live together as brothers and sisters. That was the thing that did it.

Jackie: Right. Would you say that integration of the civil rights was a positive for you? Or negative? How do you perceive... how do you...?

Bunche: Well, I can remember some of the, my girls, I had a Bluebird group. And some of my girls went to Huntington High for the first time. I think it was the first day they went to Huntington High, they came by here. They said, "Ms. Gray, we want you to explain to us what the principal meant." I said, "What did she say?" She said, "Well, girls, you have good colored teachers at Douglass High School. Why don't you go on back to Douglass High School?" So I got to thinking. They said, "Ms. Gray, what did she mean?" And I said, "She didn't mean a damn thing!" I said, "Now

she has been told, most likely, by the Board of Education, discourage those colored kids, if you can. You can't...she's doing her duty as she thinks. However, you get on back down there."

Jackie: But Douglass High School was very, a good school from what I hear, a very good black school. But when integration came about, I understand...did it close down...? ('61) '61, in 1961? Okay. Okay. Otherwise, I'm going to continue this session at a later date with Bunche Gray on the civil rights movement.

[tape being turned off then on]

Bunche: ...time during the Poverty Program, especially the Program. That's the one that Reverend Charles Nate Smith was director. Now there were three girls: one was Italian, Dee Michaels, one was Jewish, that was Marion Call, and one was just American. And all of them were American. But her name was Ann Adams. Now, those three girls worked at Action. And I don't recall them ever coming to my house until all three were fired. I can't even remember what the reason was all three of them were fired at the same time. But at any rate, they found their way here. So they were in my den, plotting. I was in here in the kitchen doing something. "Mrs. Gray, we have it all worked out." I said, "What do you have all worked out?" And I went to the door to see what they had worked out. And they said, "We have decided we know how to bring 'em down." They were gonna bring the two black leaders down. And I said, "Bring 'em down. What do you plan to do with the rest of your life?" They said, "What do you mean?" I said, "What do you plan to do with the rest of your life?" One girl had a degree, she said, "I would like to be a lawyer." The other girl wanted her master's. The other girl, I don't think she'd had any college at all. But she really wanted a Ph.D. So I

said, "Now, I'll tell you what you girls do. Get on down that road and don't even look back. Don't look back. Somebody else'll come along and do them up [inaudible] But in the meantime, you get with it." But here's the beauty of it. Those girls did that. One girl directs a band. She's over in Germany now. One girl is a lawyer in Pittsburgh. (wow) And the other girl, I don't know where she is, but someone said she's working on her Ph.D. (she's what?) Working on her Ph.D. (oh, great)

Jackie: Now, these are all women that were part of the...poverty program.

Bunche: These were part of the Poverty Program.

Jackie: Wow! Isn't that something.

Bunche: It's beautiful.

Jackie: I love to hear stuff like that.

Bunche: Now, the Poverty Program did much. And with Joan Ross, Joan was head of the Southwestern Community Action, and she actually retired as head of it. Last year. But in talking with Joan, I said to Joan one day, "Joan, I've just about figured you out." She said, "What do you mean?" I said, "Joan, you don't like niggers or poor whites." She said, "Oh, Marion, how come you said that?" I said, "I'm saying it because I know you." And she said, but I said, "Joan, I want you to know something. I'm going to fight you every inch of the way." You know what? Down through the years we fought, and down through the years things happened. Real good, with people. Because we understood each other. And it was something, the Poverty War...did a whole lot for human beings.

Jackie: Because at the time, were you working in the '60's or taking care of your children...?

Bunche: No, honey, I was working as a volunteer.

Jackie: Okay, so that took a lot of your time.

Bunche: I can remember when the, when the oh, people used to come in from Temple University and put on things, you know, so people could better understand each other. And some fellows were coming in and they called me. They said, "Bunche, are you going out to the seminar?" I said, "No." They said, "Bunche, we need you." So they went on telling me what they were planning. So they come by and picked me up. And I got in there now, most of the people were up there on the stage. So I just, and I just picked up a chair and dragged it right up the steps and when I put it next to this white girl, she turned blue. She said, "Are you going to sit here?" I said, "Hell, yes, I'm going to sit here, move over." She moved over [chuckling], and really and truly, it was something, she was scared to death. And when the players, the people from Temple University, said take off your mask. And we became human. And this girl said, "Bunche, I have never been so scared in my life." I said, "I know, I know." And you know, a lot of times people don't, they don't mean it. But one of the most beautiful things, beautiful in a sense because this man was dying and he was one of the neighborhood people who took charge of the neighborhood works. And he said, "Mrs. Gray, there's one question I want to ask of you." I said, "What's that?" He said, "This has bothered me for a long time." He said, "You know, we have fought." I said, "Right." "We have really achieved some good stuff, good things together. How did we do that?" I said, "We did it because we had no choice." He said, "Is that the answer?" I said, "The only answer." And you know what? He didn't say another word about it. He died soon after that. Yeah. How did we do that? We've done a lot of things in this town because we had no choice. (right) And

I think this is one thing maybe we better go back to. We had no choice but to do what is right.

Jackie: Yes, definitely on that.

Bunche: And I can remember this fellow calling me one day and I really meant to call him. His name was Floyd Meadows. And I said, "Floyd, I'm glad you called me because I want you to get..." this guy who had just came out of law school, and uh, I said, "I want you to get him to the meeting." He said, "How important is it? It's very important." You know, white people were scared of educated, colored people. And he came to me. Just the very idea that this guy standing up there talking and he was a talker. He talked well. One man almost had a heart attack. And it was really something. And I said this is interesting. It's really interesting. I know what white people think. Black people shouldn't be educated. I wouldn't know how to use it once I got it. But at any rate, it was interesting. Very interesting. So, I would suggest that we looky, there are real good people in Huntington. One of the basic things, you take Senator Robert C. Byrd., you know about him? (yes, I've heard of him) the senator. Okay, every time he would come out to, for re-election, Senator Byrd would cause a lot of consternation [inaudible] by others. And I watched that. Here and the blacks, definitely against him...supposedly. The whites pretended they were against him. But each time they voted more and more for him. When I started looking at the number of people that voted for Senator Byrd, each time the number got larger. I don't even know him. So, I just had to pay some attention to get to know him. So I got to know him. But Marshall University students called me and said, "Bunche, we're going down to City Hall, to a rally." I said, "So am I." "We're

going to demonstrate." I said, "Yeah. And when they throw you out, I will be standing, because I will be there to meet Senator Byrd." And they said, "Okay." So I met them downstairs in the auditorium, not the auditorium downstairs, but in the hall. But when we came upstairs you never saw so many policemen in all my life. They really were expecting the young people. One of them told them they were coming. I asked one policeman, I said, "Why do you have all these policemen here?" He said, "Oh, Miss Bunche Gray." I said, "You kidding?" But at any rate, he talked and the young people got up and demonstrated. And they...natives, Cabell County natives, those who felt they didn't want to embarrass the senator, they jumped to their feet and hustled those young people out of there. Pushing and shoving. So he made his talk. So I went up to ask him. "Why didn't you let those young people speak?" He said, "Ms. Gray, I was going to," he said, "but they were in a hurry to get them out of there." And he said he didn't appreciate that himself. But at any rate, while he was talking to me, one of the natives of Cabell County walked up and attempted to pull him away from me. And he shrugged his shoulders. And he said, "Oh, no, I want to talk to Mrs. Gray." So he left. But the main thing was this. I was in Washington to visit my daughter, and Action called me, said, "Bunche, go over on the hill to the Senate, the jobs bill is coming up. Lobby for the jobs bill." I said, "Okay." I went over there. Everybody and his brother was there from all over the country OIC and everything. But I noticed there was some trouble. The trouble was we didn't have the crippling amendments, you know...about amendments to a bill. If you don't know the amendments to a bill would be, you may not have your bill. Because you must be familiar with the crippling amendments. They

can mess up a bill and you wouldn't even recognize it. Okay, so I asked the head lobbyists, I said, "Well, why don't we have 'em? We have people from all over the country." He said, "I don't know." Then I remembered on my wall, it's not there now, but on my wall I had this thing that says, and I wondered why somebody didn't do something. Then I remembered, I am somebody. And I said to this man, "I'll be back in a minute." I went downstairs to the second lobby, wrote a little, short note to Senator Byrd, asked him to come out. And in nothing flat he was out there. And he said, "Ms. Gray, I'll give you two minutes." I said, "You don't have to give me that. Just give me the the amendments to that jobs bill." He said, "I'll give you mine." He disappeared, in nothing flat he was back. Put it in my hand. When I went back upstairs, it was just like the Heavens...Christ descending back into the Heavens.

The whole place lit up. They said, "Bunche, where'd you get it?" "From my senator." "Who is your senator?" "Robert C. Byrd." They said, "You're kidding." I said, "Yeah."

Now, you know what? I don't tell that enough. (that's wonderful) You know, really and truly, I don't tell it enough. Because he did it because he knew it was right. And sometimes we don't expect right out of people.

Jackie: That's really neat. (really wonderful) Yes, that's interesting. Try to think back then in the 1960's, what kind of...there were liberals, there were Republicans...what's your...(I'm going to tell you about my view) your preference or what's your view of the liberals at that time?

Bunche: The liberals at that time, I found out the liberals in some sense weren't shit. (they weren't...?) They weren't shit. (okay) But you had to work with them to know it. [machine off/on

to answer phone] She and I went to council meetings together, we sat on the front seat. And the council members would watch us. They could tell when we were not too satisfied, some of the things we did, you know. Okay. Now, doing this all with White Pantry and Bailey's cafeteria, my white friend had never taken any interest. But she called me one day and said, "Bunche," Jimmy was her son. Jimmy and I are demonstrating. I said, "Really?" And she said, "Yes." And I said, "Okay." Shit, I didn't believe her, but at any rate. My good friend, now [inaudible] So, you know, I said, "Really." So she didn't show up. I never thought of worrying about it, or thinking about it. One of the good church ladies, always the church, she met me there in front of First Huntington National Bank, she said, "Ms. Gray, was your white friend demonstrating?" Now here's a woman who never did, was never on the line to demonstrate, asking me about my white friend. And I said, "Who?" She said, "Your white friend." She said, "That white woman who's always talking about her black sister." And as she talked, the tears rolled down her cheeks. And I said, "You've got your damn nerve, asking about her. You weren't even in the march yourself." I said, "What's your problem?" Pretty soon I felt somebody's hand on my shoulder. It was my good white friend's son. I said, "Did you hear that lady talking about your mamma?" He said, "Yes, I did." I said, "You be sure you go home and tell your mamma." So when I went home, I called Jimmy's mamma. I said, "I want to know exactly why you didn't show up today. God rest her soul. She said, "We couldn't find the White Pantry." I said, "See you baby." I hung up. We never discussed it from that day on. She couldn't find, but anyone could find the White Pantry. So, you see, there was something we forgive our friends for that. Isn't

that true of our friends. Some things we forgive our friends for.

Jackie: We're supposed to. My son...I do, but I sometimes look back and think....

Bunche:

when I think about it, I laugh all over again. We couldn't find it. And I'm glad that she and I weren't talking together, because I would have cussed her out. But that was nothing important.

Jackie: Right. But I mean, but you know, you read about the liberals involvement, too. They were...I don't know exactly sometimes, because I hear a negative and positive on the liberal side.

Bunche: Yeah. Well, you know the one thing about liberals, they know better than to do with you than you know what to do with yourself. (okay, yeah)

END OF INTERVIEW