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Oral History Project/ William and Betty Wampler

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HIST 155, Fall 2015 / Professor Erskine

Derek Haas
Oral History Report

Student Interviewer's Name: Derek Haas
Interviewee names: William and Betty Wampler

Time and Location of Interview:

The interview was conducted in William and Betty Wampler's home. A primary interview was conducted over the phone on October 21, 2015. The second interview was approximately 1 hour long and took place on October 27, 2015. Only the interviewer and interviewees were present.

About William and Betty Wampler:

William Wampler was born in May, 1929. Throughout his life, William lived, attended school and worked in the south. He attended school at Southern Adventist University where he met his wife, Betty. Betty Grounds was born August, 1932. Betty was raised in various northern states as well as in the Caribbean where her parents were missionaries.

William worked as a Seventh-Day Adventist pastor in various predominantly white churches in the Alabama and Mississippi before eventually becoming the Alabama/Mississippi Conference president. Betty supported William's churches and helped raise their three children, Jim, Debbie, and Gary.

William and Betty felt the impact of the Civil Rights Movement as the Adventist churches in the south started to integrate and allow different nationalities into their traditionally white congregations.

Interviewer: Derek Haas (DH)
Interviewee: William Wampler (WW)
Interviewee: Betty Wampler

DH: "First thing I need to do is state a little bit about yourself, your history, and what you were doing during the Civil Rights movement."

BW: *So what time period?*

DH: The 50's and 60's

WW: Well yeah, most of what I would have to report would be during the time that I was the conference president. So, uh, let me just tell you about that and then you can narrow it down and ask me questions.

DH: Okay, that's fine.

WW: Okay, it was a troublesome time, because um, there was fault on both sides of the issue. Two churches stand out to me, was where we had the problems. The Mobile, Alabama Church, the daughter of the Oakwood President, and I can't remember what his name was. The daughter came to the Mobile church and they said, "We are here to integrate this church." Which didn't go well with the old timers. And they said there were going to get their membership there and they said that they were going to be a part of that church.

I went to visit them in their home and I said look, what you need to do is slowly start coming to this church and just become a part. But they didn't want to do that. Well they didn't like that council so they were determined to integrate the church, and on the flip side of that, there were a lot of people that were not very receptive to the black people. In fact, I am told, and I can't verify this, that some of the deacons would stand in the lobby and if some black people would come they would tell them to get lost and if they didn't they would pull out their pistols.

DH: In the church they would pull out their pistols?

WW: Yeah, now I can't say that I can verify that, but I know that in that church there was a definite feeling that, uh, we don't want those people here. And the thing that complicated life was that there, there was a Bible worker in that church and she was a black lady.

BW: I don't think she was black.

WW: Oh no? She was... she was sympathetic to the people who didn't want any black people there. And she, she had many strong feelings about this. In fact, one of her classmates was in the general conference and he tried to come on down there and reason with her, but he didn't really make any progress with that. Anyways, there were trouble spots there in Mobile.

BW: Eventually, I guess they gave in there.

WW: Huntsville was a different story. In Huntsville, we had a bunch who had moved there with the space program and there the old folks that had been there for years. Then there was this whole influx of new members and the new folks were far more open to the black folks participate in the church. In fact they got so aggravated that a group of them ended up starting up their own church. And um...

DH: Did they go to their houses or where?

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BW: No they rented out facilities. And um, they were far more open to having the blacks participate. But then, um, on the other side for instance the church organist would be right in the middle of playing a hymn and if a black person would walk in, she would gather up her music and walk right out.

DH: Wow.

WW: So you see you had two sides. Those who were open and those who were closed up to the idea. And I know at one point the NAACP came to our church and they would just not let our members go in. They said you can't go in. This church is not integrated and they would not let them go in. And so that was a complicating factor.

Now overall, the black people were saying that you know when we were given the property for Bass Memorial academy that there was a clause that said the black people would never be allowed in to the academy. Well that was never true, in fact we never found anything to that effect. But, blacks really emphasized, that a whole lot.

Anyways, the two churches centered in this were Huntsville Central, and um Mobile, where we had most of the problems. And like I say, in Mobile, our people did not have the right attitude they wouldn't have them. And the blacks didn't have the right attitude, they said they were going to integrate this church. And the complicating factor was the daughter of the Oakwood President and her husband, they were the ones that were pushing this and they said they were going to integrate this church or else. And I went and visited them in their home.

BW: You already told him that.

WW: Anyways, I went and visited them in their home. They had pictures of all these black people who were causing problems that were causing these problems all across the nation. And they had these pictures all over the walls. And I told them you know if you start attending the church and don't make a big issue about all this I think it will all settle down.

But no, and I know them, and I know that the daughter of the Oakwood President said to me. Look I am a black woman, and I am a woman, and I am a Christian, and I am a Seventh-day Adventist and it's in that order. Um, Um, I'm black, and I am a woman, and I am a Christian, and I am a Seventh-day Adventist and it's in that order. I mean I got nowhere in reasoning with those people.

BW: Go back to Bass, where um, the students weren't being accepted.

DH: So Bass Academy wasn't accepting the black students.

WW: Well that was, that was the word the blacks were spreading about.

DH: Had they been accepting black students before?

BW: *It was a new school so, um...*

WW: We said that we will accept them on the same basis that are required for whites. We will take them. And later by the way, we did get some black students and they were well received. In fact they were friends of our children.

BW: Well it was a new school and I asked Jim the other day and he said that he didn't remember any black students when he was there, but there were some with our daughter and I know for a fact that there were some.

DH: In more like 74-75 then?

BW: Yeah, and I know that one of the black boys even became student president, I believe.

WW: And here, here is an interesting story for you. The black conference liked to promote the idea that we would not accept the students and that they weren't allowed to be there. But there was nothing to that effect.

I'm just saying that there were a lot of little things going on.

DH: So a lot of interesting dynamics.

BW: I would like to go back to the 50's, Hiesburg, Mississippi. That was the first church that we pastored. At that time the actual Civil Rights movement hadn't really started. And we had an elderly couple that had a black lady who stayed at their home. And she would come to church with them and nobody thought anything of it. She just came and sat in church with them. Nothing was ever said or questioned. No problems at all, and that probably wouldn't have been true ten years later. Maybe the community would have had something to say about that then. I have the feeling that the southern folks had the feeling that the northern folks were coming down to be missionaries to them if you want to use that word and to show them that they should be doing the right thing. And lets be honest, there were a lot of southerners who were very racist, we aren't denying that at all. And some of the tactics that were used kind of upset the southerners.

WW: So, um, Betty's parents lived in Indianapolis, and we went up there to visit and they wanted me to preach. I said fine. They said, they want me to preach about all the problems that we were having in the south. And I said, I don't I don't think we had that many problems. And they wanted me to tell them about all the problems.

DH: When was this?

BW: *Well it would have been either when... My dad passed away in 63 so it would have been late 50's or early 60's, but we knew from the north that they had some problems there too. And the southerners knew this and they felt they were being picked on in the south. And like I said, there were people who were very prejudice. Doing the wrong thing.*

DH: Okay, so, how do you feel like the dynamic of the prejudice changed before the civil rights movement, during the civil rights movement, such as during the Montgomery bus boycott and while Martin Luther King was being very proactive, and after the civil rights act had passed?

WW: Well, I think people still retained their prejudice, their bias. And I don't even think that has changed today hardly.

BW: *You have some, probably the older southern people who have that background that feel that way. When we were in Montgomery, this would have been the early 70's and they were generally well accepted. But there were still the other older southerners in the church who did not like the fact that they were there, and it was very obvious. But in general, and I suppose, maybe a new generation coming up who didn't have all that to deal with would be better at that.*

DH: You mean just to clear that mindset?

BW: *Trying to think, you know there were many families who had black maids or people who came in or to do the ironing and they were very much loved by those families. And that may not be the case in every case. But they were almost like a part of the family, and those black ladies were lovely that came in. They were just very well accepted.*

DH: So do you think those families were more comfortable with black people because they had previously associated with them. With the maid or whoever at their house who was a positive person in their life and not just the negative connotation that they saw in the news.

BW: *Some kids had black nannies, you might say, and they loved them and the nannies loved them too.*

WW: The whole thing was that the south, many of the natives of the south felt that this was being pushed on them, this integration was being forced on them. And some of the blacks came in with a very militant attitude.

BW: *Which didn't go over too well.*

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WW: **No.**

BW: *Like he said there is fault on both sides. And it needed to be changed, the status needed to be changed. Back then you had different water fountains. Black colored and white. At the train station there was a colored waiting room and a white waiting room. And that was just the status quo back then when we came to the south.*

DH: Do you remember differences in quality or location for the white people, was it better or cleaner?

BW: *I can't say.*

DH: So you never really saw the alternative?

BW: *I don't remember any difference for water fountains, which is all we would have seen. I guess we were in a different world than most of the general public as far as we were more in the church world and maybe it was a little different there. I don't think...*

DH: So would you say that the Civil Rights Movement affected your daily life because of your role in the church or was it just something happening in the background? Was it in your face, or prevalent at all?

BW: *I don't think it was for me, you know I was there but it wasn't a daily problem in my life. We had kids and the church and stuff. Maybe he dealt with it more with the church but not personally.*

WW: **It... It kind of, you know from the southern standpoint some of this was being promoted and pushed on us. Now today, we have a number of black people who are well respected, they are classy people and they hold a number of offices. This would not have been true back in those days.**

DH: So it had a big effect on that?

BW: *I don't know how far north this was, say you lived in Pennsylvania or wherever, I don't know if they had separate water fountains or whatever. Before I lived in Maryland and I... I honestly can't remember. If we had um, those. Do you remember? In Virginia?*

WW: I don't know.

DH: You just don't remember if there was segregation?

BW: *I went to Tacoma Academy in the 40's and I don't remember any black students. There were Hispanic, there were no black students I don't think when we were at southern there in the 50's.*

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WW: Mmm, I don't think so.

BW: Back in the 50's, well late 40's early 50's. And that became an issue with the Union. Way back before that, my parents had been missionaries in the Caribbean. But we eventually came back. And my dad knew somebody who was Indian, from the country of India. And he had come to the States and he wanted to go to college at what was then Washington Missionary College in Tacoma. And he was very dark. And they did not want to admit him, and I do not know the end result of that, but it made my dad very upset.

DH: That they wouldn't admit him?

BW: Yes, and like I said, I don't remember the end result of that. I was just a child and I don't remember whether or not he was. But since we had done the Caribbean islands I don't think we had any prejudice at all in our family. It was just... what we were used to.

WW: I think the all-important thing was the way it came about. I mean, some things needed to happen. The blacks needed to have equal privilege and all that but the way they went about it, trying to legislate it...

DH: So do you think it should have been a slower process?

WW: Well it may never have happened if it hadn't been legislated?

DH: do you think it would have been better if it was led out by white people or...

WW: Like I said, there was fault on both sides. The whites were resistant to this integration idea and the blacks were all forcing it.

BW: But it wasn't all blacks, there were some whites who came you know trying to do it also.

DH: So there was white support as well.

BW: Well there were whites who came. And here I am talking about something I don't really know for sure. There may have been some southern whites, but it really seemed they were coming from the north trying to show what they should do. And there were changes that needed to be made but it was resented.

WW: And it was too bad how it all came about. But if it hadn't we would have still been...

BW: Well, its all just history, and back then they were trying to integrate the schools, you know back then. In Alabama, people were standing up against it. there were some terrible things that happened. Its just sad, sad part of history.

DH: Ok. So how were some of the key figures that we think of today, like Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, or the NAACP, how were they presented back then in the south.

WW: Resented. But the thing is that if they had not have done it, some of these things would have never come about. And like you said, Rosa Parks. She took a stand, and if she had not of done it, we might still never come about... we might still have segregated buses and whatever. You know we were looking at it from the stand point of the church which was very limited... um, perspective in a way. But I know that I resented some of the things that were happening in our churches. Like this girl who was the daughter of the Oakwood president would... she said we are here to integrate this church.

DH: So the forcefulness?

WW: Well she would just come in... and I, I tried to reason with her, you know I said if you folks just come in and start attending I think you'll be fine. But if you come in and announce, I think you are going to have problems. So...

DH: So, what did the news portray, were there different things portrayed about these people? How did you see that or did you?

WW: Well the newspapers were full of that.

BW: When did that even happen? I remember that it happened

WW: We are just giving you an overview of what we saw, we may not be answering your questions exactly.

DH: The bus boycott was 1955-1956.

BW: That's when Rosa Parks did her thing?

DH: Yes.

WW: Well my southern blood kind of boiled when I thought about how the south was being forced to do some things. I can tell you with my southern background I didn't feel good about it. But I can say that if those things didn't happen then things may have never changed. The blacks deserved to be served like the whites. They would go into some of these places and fill up the counters and try to force themselves in.

DH: So do you think this had to happen this way?

BW: Well maybe it wouldn't have happened if it didn't go this way.

WW: Possibly, but the feelings are not gone even now. There are still people that feel this way, very resentful.

BW: But I think that it's the older generation, wouldn't you say?

WW: Well like I say the Huntsville church was full of all these people who were space centered and it didn't bother them to have blacks in the church, but the old hammers, like I said, the church organist would get up and walk out if a black person came in.

We had to be careful how we dealt with it. I didn't appreciate how they had left our church and didn't try to resolve it. You know, you couldn't reason with the people.

DH: Was that all black people who left or who felt the church wasn't integrating?

BW: They were all white.

WW: All white.

BW: We hoped they would stay with the church, and I don't know... did they come back eventually?

WW: Well I talked to the head elder, Gordon, and I said Gordon we have to get those people back. And he said oh no don't touch that, you'll just aggravate the church. And I said no, so I went on up there to reason with them. And they did come back, the church got back together, a lot of unsettled feelings.

BW: So you're saying the civil rights era was from 54-64?

WW: It was wrong to have segregated drinking fountains and restrooms. It was not right. The way they went about trying to integrate just aggravated the problem.

DH: In that aggravation, did you see effects of radical racist groups such as the KKK when you started to integrate in the church?

BW: No.

WW: Not really. You know like the NAACP surrounding our church saying like, oh you won't integrate this church, but I don't remember...

BW: Not anything like the KKK. Do you?

WW: No. There were some of our members that would have gone into a holy war if the blacks had forced themselves in any further.

BW: *Some were very radical.*

WW: And, Derek, this is still an issue that has not been resolved and won't be until the Lord comes. There are still people with strong feelings on both sides of that issue, and I don't think it will be readily resolved.

BW: *Maybe if a new generation keeps coming up it will still... the older folks will... maybe its not old folks.*

DH: Its not all old folks.

WW: And in our church we have several black families and they are very nice to deal with, they are very nice people. And the whole church office and everybody respects them.

BW: *I've not heard of anybody at any point talk bad against them, no bad feelings.*

DH: So there has definitely been progress then?

WW: **Oh yeah.**

BW: *We can't go back to Mobile, Huntsville, but I assume there are black members and that things have gone back to normal.*

WW: **We've talked all around your questions...**

DH: It's fine. There is good information coming from your church perspective.

WW: **When we did get black students, they merged right in.**

DH: So the students did well?

WW: **No real issues. I think it all depended on the person.**

BW: *People seemed to accept them and respect them, and I think one of those boys ended up being the student president.*

WW: Probably some of this would have never come about if there had not been laws enacted, but it's unfortunate how it came about.

BW: *Partly true.*

DH: Alright, that's very helpful.

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BW: *Yeah, we were busy with our own lives and the daily news and stuff didn't get seen as much.*

DH: Yeah, so you didn't really see a lot of that.

BW: *It seems like... like life went on pretty normally for us, but we heard it in the news. And there were some horrible things that were done down there in Mississippi.*

DH: Is there anything else that I should know?

WW: Everything depended on the attitude of the individuals. You know? Um...

BW: *And we have a black President now, and another one running.*

WW: You couldn't have imagined that back then.

To sum it up, it all depended on the attitude of individuals. You know? I was aggravated by some of our white members, who were so against having black members come in. And then by some of the black members who said, you know, we are going to integrate your churches regardless.

DH: So you found yourself more in the middle ground?

WW: Sort of. When I see people pushing themselves in, I kind of resent that. I have enough Southern...

BW: *Well it doesn't have to be in the integration issue, on any issue when people are pushing themselves in.*

WW: And maybe we will get ourselves another black president if Ben Carson keeps rising... and yeah...

The civil rights movement, if they hadn't of had people in there pushing for legislation, it probably would have never happened, but from that standpoint it was probably good. There were people who were just so adamant about it, their stand that it just muddied the waters.

DH: Alright, well thank you very much for your time.

BW: *Absolutely.*

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I spent approximately 2.5 hours reading in preparation for the second interview.