

“Down Home: Jewish Life in North Carolina”

Interview with Charles L. “Buddy” Weill, Jr.

Performed by Sandra Sokoloff

Performed at office of Robins & Weill, Inc. 324 W. Wendover Ave., Greensboro, NC

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SSS: This is an interview with Buddy Weill. The date is July 20th, it is 4:20 pm, and I’m interviewing Charles C. [sic] Weill, Jr. Okay, Sir. Let’s start from the beginning. Where and when were you born?

BW: In Greensboro, in August 1924.

SS: When did your family come to—Was it your parents who came to Greensboro?

BW: My parents... My mother went to school at what is now UNCG, in the period right after the turn of the century; my father moved to Greensboro in 1911.

SS: And where did they move from?

BW: My mother was raised primarily in Goldsboro, and my father in Rockingham. My mother attended school here, and later at Shorter College in Rome, Georgia, and my father went to school in Chapel Hill, at the University of North Carolina.

SS: And were your parents born in America?

BW: Yes, both were born in this country.

SS: Who were the first of your family to come to America?

BW: My father’s mother’s family came to this country in the 1700s, don’t know the date. His father came to this country after the Civil War, from Germany, from an area near the German and French border. My mother’s family, her mother was born in this country, and I’m not sure what generation of her family was the original immigrant to this country. Her father—my grandfather on my mother’s side—immigrated to this county, again, sometime after the Civil War. I don’t know the date.

SS: Do you know why they chose to come to the South, or why they chose America? Did they have family here?

BW: I don’t have a specific answer why either... why my paternal grandfather came to the South. My mother’s father came to this country to work for his uncles, Mistery Meyer and Sig Lehman, who were originally in the cotton business in Montgomery, Alabama. He is their nephew, worked for them. Those two men, her great-uncles, the Lehmans, later changed their business from cotton to finance, and created what we now know as Lehman Brothers Holding Company. Her grandfather, having worked with his uncles in

the cotton business, continued, later moving to St. Louis, where my mother was actually born, and then relocated, when she was a very young girl, to Goldsboro to continue his vocation in the cotton mercantile business, working with people in that part of the state, where cotton was a major crop.

SS: Do you have any siblings?

BW: One sister, Carolyn Lebauer, nine years older than I am, living here in Greensboro. She, too, was born in this city.

SS: Where was your first home in Greensboro? Do you recall where you first lived when you were born?

BW: I was born in Fisher Park, at home. Lived at 211 Isabel Street.

SS: Did you live in Fisher Park throughout your childhood, or for the rest of your life?

BW: I lived there... My family moved into Fisher Park approximately when my—the approximate date that my sister was born, in 1915. She spent her unmarried years at the same place. I was born nine years later, as I mentioned, in 1924, and continued to live there with my family until I was fifteen years old. At that time they relocated to St. Andrew's Road, in Irving Park.

SS: How many people lived in your household? Did you have any borders, or any staff, household staff, or was it just family?

BW: The family unit consisted of my mother, father, my sister and myself and we always had domestic help. Go by various names, then and now. Someone who assisted with the cooking, raising us as children, cleaning, all the domestic duties.

SS: How long have you been married?

BW: Forty-three years.

SS: And do you have any children?

BW: No children.

SS: Where is your spouse from? Is she from Greensboro as well?

BW: She was born in Virginia, moved to this city when she was six or eight months old, and lived here ever since.

SS: How did you two meet?

BW: In post-secondary education social groups as existed throughout (unclear).

SS: So you grew up in Fisher Park. Were there many Jews in the neighborhood, was it considered a Jewish neighborhood?

BW: No. Such identities did not exist in Greensboro, in any ethnic group of which I'm familiar, and I think I knew the community fairly well at that time. The only distinctions in Greensboro during those years of, those earlier years when I was growing up, were the white community was distinctively separated from the African American community.

SS: So the neighborhood was predominantly white?

BW: Exclusively.

SS: Your family owned its home?

BW: Yes.

SS: So if there wasn't much of an identity around religion, as far as your social groups or friends, you were pretty much integrated?

BW: In the group with which I grew up that would certainly describe it adequately.

SS: Did yourself or any other members of your family serve in the military?

BW: Yes, I did.

SS: And during World War II, I gather?

BW: World War II.

SS: And what level did you reach, and where did you serve? Did you go to the Middle East, or did you go to Europe, where were you stationed?

BW: I did training in this country. Part of that training was attendance at Georgetown University in Washington, DC. It was what was called, in those days A.S.T.P.: Army Specialized Training Program, studying engineering. It was an extension of—an educational extension—of work that I was then doing towards a degree at the University of North Carolina. When that training was terminated I joined an existing military unit, the 102nd Infantry Division, further training, preparation for actual service overseas, then went to Europe in the early fall of 1944. Then in France...saw military, saw actual combat service in Northern France, Southern Belgium, Holland, Germany.

SS: Were you still in Europe when the war ended? When they were defeated?

BW: Yes, I was there throughout the remainder of the conflict.

SS: So when you came back what did you do? You said you went to the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill?

BW: I started studies in Chapel Hill following graduation from Greensboro Senior High School in 1941. I went into the service when I was 18, in early 1943. I was interrupted, the program in Chapel Hill. And on returning from Europe, I went back to Chapel Hill to finish school, and to obtain a degree, a B.S. in Commerce, finishing there in the late spring of 1947, after three years in the military.

SS: Which high school did you go to?

BW: What we now refer to as Grimsley Senior High School was called Greensboro Senior High School in those days, and those of us who went there continue to affectionately refer to it as Greensboro Senior High School.

SS: I read that it was the first school in Greensboro that was integrated...is that right?

BW: No, that is not correct. The first school to be integrated in Greensboro was Gillespie Park, which was an elementary school. There were only two high schools in Greensboro, many elementaries and a few junior highs, but only two senior high schools. One had been for vocation or white race, and the other for the African Americans. When integration progressed far enough, the program included integrating the senior—Greensboro Senior High School, which was—had therefore been the white high school, but it was not the first.

SS: Growing up, in a segregated era, compared to—I mean, you can't really compare it to now, but—do you have any thoughts or any, did it strike you as unusual? What was it like growing up growing up in a segregated high school, a segregated community?

BW: It's difficult to answer the question because I have nothing to say. It was the social style of the time, acknowledged by all, in every group, accepted, and there was no underlying movement nor animosity to have our social order any different than had been long established and... never any thought, to my mind.

SS: Can you tell me a little about your domestic help. Did you have anyone long term while you were growing up? Do you recall anybody's names that you were particularly attached to?

BW: Domestic help? As I remember, it was quite commonplace for those that could afford assistance with housekeeping, and that would be much of the middle income, or those that you would think of today as a middle income type of availability, and of course the upper income, or higher income families. But domestic help was one of the few opportunities that African American women had to gain an income. So they were readily available for that service, and the economics of the time were such that those wages were easily managed by families with which I was familiar, which would be the middle and upper income families. I'm sure a lot of the lower income earners such as the textile mill

workers would not have had the advantage of domestic help, but it was... Without any other outlets for gainful employment, African American women were commonplace in the market—in the marketplace—for doing this kind of service.

SS: Did your family household keep kosher?

BW: No.

SS: So for the help doing the cooking there were no restrictions for cooking?

BW: None.

SS: What kind of things did you eat growing up? What kind of food did the cook usually prepare for your family?

BW: I wish I could answer that, but whatever was available in the marketplace. We didn't have the advantages of frozen foods we have today. It was what was provided in the marketplace by the local farmers, particularly in the summer months, and what was available on the shelves in the grocery stores most of which—many of which—were just small one- or two-person-operated grocery stores. A lot of canned goods and in the summer months we used (unclear), at least in my house, for preserving some of the summer produce by way of canning or available in wartime. I don't know what else to say.

SS: Did your family belong to a synagogue when you were growing up?

BW: Temple Emanuel.

SS: What about now? Still the same, or not involved?

BW: Both my sister and I who are the only surviving members of the family are members of Temple Emanuel, though we're not active.

SS: Do you belong to any civic organizations or any clubs or anything at the moment, or anything over your life? Did you ever belong to a brotherhood or any Jewish organizations, or Rotary Club, or anything like that?

BW: I personally did not participate in many Jewish organizations. I briefly acquainted myself with Hillel activities, if you worked in North Carolina, but it was a very minor part of college life. It offered very little way of outlet for me. After maturity, I've always maintained a membership in the brotherhood of Temple Emanuel, but I have not been active. Locally—at Chapel Hill I was a member of Zeta Beta Tau—ZBT—social fraternity, Jewish fraternity. Locally, when I returned to Greensboro, I applied myself to community activities. I'm a member of Greensboro Rotary Club, Greensboro Country Club, some other small social groups, (unclear) club, my wife's social club, things of this

type. I have participated extensively in other community activities, but I think those are a pretty good sample.

SS: What does your wife do? Does she work or does she have a career?

BW: Homemaker.

SS: Let's move to a different train of thought. First, how did you get the nickname "Buddy"?

BW: Because I'm a junior. That was the way I was distinguished at home and amongst the family, amongst the family friends.

SS: Your company is insurance. Was it established by your father, I guess?

BW: Established by my father in 1911. He and his partner ran the company until they died, in 1953. In the meantime I had joined the company upon graduation at Chapel Hill, in 1947. And after the death of the two founders, it became my responsibility to continue the operation. I've been working here for very close to 68 years.

SS: Do you have any other senior partners now or do you run the show?

BW: I am the senior person but I'm beginning to move the ownership to other staff members here in the organization.

SS: As a businessman, have you ever had any experiences of anti-Semitism within the business establishment, or any conflict as a Jew doing business in the community?

BW: I'm very fortunate, and I've experienced none.

SS: You've never encountered any sort of conflict with banks, or with any other...

BW: ...Ethnic groups? No. I feel fortunate I don't know that that can be universally said about everyone in Greensboro. Greensboro has been a very compassionate community, recognizing various faiths, racial and other social differences, and in *my* observation, Greensboro is about as understanding a group as a community as any I can think of, and I'm not aware of any discriminatory practices. I can't believe that some don't exist in some sectors or segments of the community, but it has not been my experience. I've been—I feel like as a member of this community I have assimilated. My parents seemed to experience the same. I don't know about me grandparents; I don't know of any animosity in their experience.

SS: This is about African American relations. Do you perceive any differences between northern and southern Jews towards blacks?

BW: I don't have any basis to judge northern impressions towards African Americans. In the South—which is the area I know best—and relating to my friends, peers and other associates, I don't know of any particular prejudices. Clearly, if I grew up within a segregated society, I suppose you could accuse all of us of having prejudices because we didn't de-segregate. It was a style of the time, and it was an accepted standard. I'm not aware of any hostilities, although I'm—clearly, as I read the media and otherwise familiarize myself with segments of the community with which *I* did not associate, there must have been, and must *still* be, some pretty strong prejudices. But personally, I am not acquainted with any, I had no conflict, or observed, or been a part of any conflict, either intimately or with any organization with which I have been affiliated over my lifetime.

SS: Did you have a bar mitzvah?

BW: No.

SS: Did you go through the confirmation?

BW: I did. And that was the common practice of the time. And I don't remember any bar mitzvahs being conducted when I was—in my age group—when I was coming along; it just was not a practice.

SS: You had Jewish education up until your confirmation? You went to Sunday school, or you had Jewish education up until—?

BW: I went to Sunday school every week, through confirmation and a short time after.

SS: Did your family ever speak languages other than English?

BW: No.

SS: Were you involved in any youth groups? Did you have a strong affiliation in your family with the synagogue or was it just about the High Holy Days?

BW: My parents had various significant responsibilities in the activities of Temple Emanuel. They were a young couple, and maturing through the period they were raising my sister and me. My sister was an active participant in temple activities such as the Sisterhood, and those types of affiliations. I don't remember that there were but a very few families in Greensboro that had a strong, and what we might refer to as an exclusive relationship with the temple. We were all assimilated—as *I* remember it—we were all assimilated within the broader community to such a degree that we did not *have* to, or choose to rely on the temple—what we called it, synagogue, if you want to be formal about it—we did not have to have an exclusive relationship in order to have a social relationship.

SS: Do you consider yourself a Southerner, a Jew, a Jewish Southerner... How do you identify, how do you describe your identity?

BW: I'm a little bit old-fashioned. I consider myself as an American citizen raised and familiar with southern practices, and I'm of the Jewish faith. To me it's a faith, not a race, or any other specific identity than just faith.

SS: I think I get a really good sense of how you see yourself and your family. I don't really have anything more I want to ask. Is there you have anything you want to say or you want to contribute, any anecdotes or any sort of stories that you might have? Any thoughts about this project?

BW: I have no particular thoughts about the project. I think it's admirable that the project is being undertaken, and I commend those who are working diligently, as you are, to provide the base to make the results worthy. That's the only thoughts I have about the project.

As I'm sure, you must have heard some others with respect to the community. I have the utmost praise for the community (unclear), for the people who are the populace of Greensboro. I have the utmost respect and praise for whatever has caused this community to be so open to all things, in particular if you speak of this group. Greensboro is unique. From what I've heard, read, observed, as compared to some other places that folks like ourselves might be living. And that is indeed a blessing. It is an ideal for society in general, and religion in particular. Because of the ease with which all groups—be they religious, faith-based groups, ethnic groups, racial groups—it's because of this openness within the Greensboro community that makes it such a wonderful place to be. How much discrimination, blatant or subtle or hidden it may be, I don't know. I haven't experienced it.

It has been my observation that anyone from a specific group can easily assimilate in this community, and become one of a part of the whole. And that's an integral situation to be involved in. I feel fortunate because I've been looking back over the years of my citizenry here and it's been—I feel like I was just assimilated when I was born. And it applies whether you're thinking of the various levels of school, the extracurricular activities such as scouting, with which I was involved as a teenager; be it higher education; be it community affairs, civic affairs, educational activities, or social affairs, the community seems to be almost without prejudice. I think it's just commendable, and every now and then it's appropriate to recognize that. So I use this opportunity to repeat what *I* believe, is an enviable social community life in this city.

SS: Thank you very much!

BW: Thank you for taking the time to be here.s