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University of Baltimore
1420 N. Charles Street
Baltimore, MD 21201

Dear Reverend Chester Wickwire,

The University of Baltimore is launching a two-year investigation called "'68 Riots and Rebirth," a project centered around the events that followed the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., their effects on the development of our city. UB administration and faculty members in the law school and in the undergraduate departments of history and community studies are planning a series of projects and events to commemorate the 40th anniversary of this pivotal event. We are currently working with the Reginald F. Lewis Museum of Maryland African American History, The Jewish Museum of Maryland, Maryland Public Television and the Enoch Pratt Free Libraries to pursue funding for projects that may include conferences, a television documentary and a library traveling exhibit.

Your potential participation in an oral history project would contribute to the very foundation of this project – the memories of Baltimoreans who lived through the riots and saw the changes that came about in response to them. Your life story can fill in the limited knowledge we learn from newspaper accounts and the television footage.

If you choose to participate in the project you would be interviewed by students from the University of Baltimore who are currently taking "The New South and Civil Rights." Their work in this course will inform their questions, but your memories will determine the direction of the interviews.

If you agree to serve as an oral history informant in this project, you will meet with a team of undergraduate students on three different occasions. On the first meeting, the students will take a still photograph of you. In addition, if you have a photo of yourself in or around 1968, we would greatly appreciate it if we could borrow it, scan it, and return it. We would reserve the rights to reproduce those photos and use them in the documentary, conferences, exhibit or publications.

The students may conduct the interviews at a location of your choice, or you may meet them at the University of Baltimore Langsdale Library for your interviews. During the interviews, your recollections will be recorded in two forms: audio and video. The students will be responsible for operating the equipment. You can expect the interviews to last for a minimum of 30 minutes each.

The general topics for the three interviews will be:

- 1) Your life before 1968
- 2) Your experiences of the events of April 1968
- 3) What you see as changes that came about as a result of the riots

You will be interviewed three times to give you a chance to process the questions and make sure you are giving the fullest narrative possible. Sometimes talking about events that occurred decades ago will unearth forgotten memories. Undoubtedly, some of those remembrances will be negative. We greatly appreciate your willingness to take the risk of exploring a potentially painful past so that your life experiences will be recorded.

After the interviews the students will transcribe your oral history. They will provide you with a copy of the transcription for your review before the transcription is published. The transcription, video and audio records will be archived in the Langsdale Library Special Collections and will be accessible to the public. Your name will be attached to these documents. The University of Baltimore may use your image and/or your words in any future documentaries, exhibits, conferences or publications. Participants in the oral history project agree to waive their confidentiality.


If at any time you are uncomfortable with participation in the study, you are free to drop out. Participation is strictly voluntary. While your participation is requested and highly valued, you are free to decide whether or not to continue participation at all times. You may decline to have your name published with your reminiscences

If you have any questions about this project, please feel free to contact me at 410-837-5296. Thank you for your participation.

Sincerely,

Elizabeth M. Nix, Ph.D.
Visiting Assistant Professor
History and Community Studies
The University of Baltimore

I have read and understand the information provided above, and consent to participate in the study. I have also been given a copy of the informed consent for my records.



Chester Wickwire Interview Transcription
Mark Sokolic, Molly Burnett and Chris McEntee
12/01/06

CM: Alright, I guess the first place to start is just to introduce yourself and you said you wanted to tell us a little bit about growing up in Nebraska and Colorado.

CW: I'm Chester Wickwire and I am a Chaplin of Emeritus at Johns Hopkins University and um, actually my wife and I came here in 1953. That's before your grandfathers were born (laugh...) and uh, so you I had been pretty active with the University and the city since I've been here. We came here sort of at the end of the red scare and the like. And um Joe McCarthy was still very active and making his charges on people involved in the red scare and all of that sort of thing, and one of them was here at Hopkins, I'll think of his name later. But in any case, um I had um I said I guess I was born in Nebraska -1911. I guess that's right (laugh), 1911. When I was 6 yrs old my father took the family out to Colorado to the rattlesnake peaks of Olmsted. Now this was in a time of depression. And um. Now my father, he was very, he had had a number of businesses, um. He was into railroading, and he was into automobile and pianos and a lot of stuff like this. We were in Innovia, Nebraska- it's about eight miles from Red Clout which is well known. Red Clout umm Innovia is no longer in existence actually, so my brother, my grandmother, and others hadn't been there in Green Forest. My grandmother for a while lived next door to. Who's the one when there old pioneers, um, what the hell is his name? Um, I can't remember what her name was, but.

CM: The only one I know is Alcott.

CW: What?

CM: I said the only one I know is Alcott, from the Little Women.

CW: Well, in any case, I was born in Nebraska. When I'm six years old, my father took the family out in this depression to Colorado to the Rattlesnake peaks of Olmsted. We had 200 acres and took a um cow...took 40 acres to feed a cow and a calf out there then, so we couldn't make it, so, that was a failure. The things, there is not that much that I remember about Nebraska, because we left there when I was pretty young. They say memory kicks in about age three. So, we are out in Colorado. We start out living in a circular tent from the First World War. The tent, we were sleeping in that and our tent caught fire and burned down. Then we went underground, and my father, he built a cave dugout for me, which we moved into. So we lived in that. We were underground.

CM: Ha, ha. That's a far cry from Yale Divinity.

CW: Well, that doesn't matter. In any case, this was quite an experience. We went to one...school, a teacher that has a lot of grades. And um, so we were there in the area and got big snows, big storms, and a lot of heat. The one horse saved us once when we got lost in a snow storm, and we tried to go a certain way home and the horse would not do it,

so it knew better we did and got us home. So, this is kind of an aside, but we didn't make it and uh, so we had to get out of there so we began going, after we lived there for that period of time and went to school. We began moving north because my father couldn't make a living there. So we lived in Walsenburg, he did different things and he had a coal mine for awhile and different businesses. And we eventually kept moving north and ended up in Colorado Springs, Colorado City. Between Manitou and Colorado springs (pause for water) I'm sorry. So here we are and we kept moving north we lived in Walsenburg for awhile, but eventually getting into Colorado City- Colorado city between Manitou and Colorado Springs and My Father who had been on the railroad before we left Nebraska and My mother did not want him ever to go back to the railroad, but he did. So when we got to Colorado city, he went to work for the Midland terminal, which was a line that brought gold from like cripple creek and so on, so it could be dealt with in the golden cycle mine in Colorado City and but here's where we live. We, uh, had different things going on in our lives in terms of where we lived now. My father traded a certain amount of land out in Colorado for us for a 17 room house in Colorado City. And um, that house, we didn't realize it, but that house had once been a famous whore house. In the area. So um, I do know this, when we moved in there, there was an actual, active whore house right across in the backyard our house in the ally. Mrs. Drum was the manager and she wanted to hire me o bring in coal, and my father said if I took that job, I was no longer his son. So in any case, she had a certain number of girls that she brought in and every so often my father would call the police and tell them to get the damn crowd outta there. And uh, and they would all, the police would take them away, then they would all come back. Now my mother, she tried to do something about it and she asked the Madam, could she come in and give Bible studies to the whores and she wouldn't let them. So, neither my father or my Mother could win with them. These women, the girls, would be taken away, then they would come back. So it didn't workout, but it was kind of a funny situation.

CM: So your interest in Divinity and study came from your parents?

CW: No. Well my mother was a religious zealot and my father wasn't into religion at all. And uh, so at times, my mother and father would argue about things- you know, about religion. And my mother's asking father "papa, oh, you're saved" he got damn tired of it. And um, so that was, there was always this ongoing conversation between my parents. My father, who didn't have anything to do with religion, my mother, she had her bible and my father had a lot of guns, so that um, out here in Colorado now and you know, I grew up in a gun culture, and I remember when my father gave me a gun to sleep on. We always slept on guns; we thought everyone slept on .38 Smith & Wesson. But um, so, we lived there and I went to an Adventist church school. My mother was a 7th of the Adventists. And, we went to a church school. And, you know what? It was an interesting time that we had out there. Then eventually, I was going to the Adventists church school, in Colorado Springs, but eventually I went to a middle school. I went away to a school that when up until the 12th grade up in Loveland Colorado. Then I graduated from there and I went to college in Nebraska, Lincoln. Union college was a 7th of the Adventists College. So I went to college there. So I don't whether you want to ask me questions or something as we go along.

CM: I have questions. You went to college in Nebraska and it sounds like from what you were saying, your mother was definitely a believer and your father was into gun culture, but you grew up and became a minister and a member of non-violence and a proponent of non-violence. How did that come about?

CW: Well, So in any case I went to this middle school graduated in twelfth grade. Then I went to union college in Nebraska, college, and I graduated from there. So, I didn't know what I wanted to do, so I decided to become a minister, although I was not trained. See, the Baptists they had the call. That's ok. You did not have to have a lot of training. And in a sense, the Adventists are a little bit in that way. So, I did become a singing Evangelists. Now, I studied voice all my life. I studied in New York, I studied in Yale, I studied at University of Colorado, I studied here. And of course, the polio sort of put me out of business, I had polio in 48. That's why I'm in the chair, wheelchair. I was on crutches since 48 until a few years ago I fell and broke a hip. So, that um, sort of account for at least some of where I am right now. So, I was 13 months straight in the hospital with Polio. I have gone out a singing Evangelists with the Adventists. I had dropped out of that and I went to Yale Divinity School, I was already out doing stuff because Adventists didn't require a lot. I worked with the Adventists as a singing Evangelist in Colorado, in Denver, Lungdon Colorado, Western Slope. Then after this thing, I went to New Haven, and I still had some Adventists churches and I went to Yale Divinity School, and I did very well. And after this I um went ahead and finished up my degree at the Divinity School, I did well. (13 minutes) I knew the Bible very well. So, you know, that was no problem for me. Most of the students did not know it like I did. I knew it. I remember once I made the Homiletics professor real mad at me. We all ended up in the Homiletics class and I had to give a sample sermon. I said I've read the bible before, and a lot of those guys have never read it, they were trying to stay out of the war. This was amusing thing that made the Homiletics professor mad as hell at me, because I implied that he had a lot of guys there who were trying to stay out of the war. And, so, it was interesting. I made very good grades while I was there. They gave prized for the knowledge of the older testament, and I won both of them. That is not bragging, its just true that I knew the Bible. So in any case, that was an interesting experience. So, I had a lot of great friends there, among the professors. I don't know if you ever heard the Neibhur brothers. Anyway, these are famous people in Theology. New York and Yale, I had Richard and his brother was Reinhold. He wrote the Gifford Lectures once. But these are really great guys. I had some wonderful teachers there. So, in any case, I've finished the VD, I was out for a year, I went back. Just started back Community School...to Yale rather, and graduate school and I got polio so I was in Graduate school when I got Polio. And then, so I went into the uh, I had three doctors and they didn't identify this as polio, my wife and I did. In any case, eventually, we identified this as polio. They put us into Yale hospital, and it was a month in isolation. And 13 months after this, the month in isolation was difficult; there was a lot of pain. Various things happened there, they didn't know what to do with polio. The people didn't know. After a month of isolation, they put me into a popper's ward. Twenty bed open ward. Iron nose and throat in neurology and orthopedics. This was also....like I said, there were people from different areas that had problems with urology or iron nose and throat or

something with their bones and the like. So, I am in this twenty person ward and it was also a popper's ward. So we um, I am in there for 12 months, no 7 months. This ward that I was in, you go to sleep at night, get up in the morning, and the guy next to you is gone...he died. We didn't see someone in there. A stranger, then there is a guard, somebody from the jail. This was really an interesting experience to be with them. It was an education, a very good education with these people. But, the care was questionable, everyday you know the doctors come to see me and they come close to me and look at you and talk, then they go and whisper and you don't know what their saying, and you want to know. So, once in a while a young intern would come back and say, look don't pay attention to whatever was said, he was drunk again. It was just an interesting kind of time that we had. There are all kinds of things that happened there in that place. This was really a good experience for me, and to experience some of the pain that these other people were going through. And in a sense, healing came for me with these guys in that place. I sang all my life, I studied voice. Sometimes we had male quartets in that. The lights would go out at night, and next to me was a guy named Jesse. A black guy from Stiles brickyard and we would sometimes sort of lead off and he would be kind of a baritone and I would be a tenor. We would sing and others would join in, it was an interesting time. Now, there was an interesting thing about this place. When they came around at night at six or seven o'clock, they brought us our orange juice and the like but they also brought us whiskey and wine. And I have never been accustomed to this; I have been brought up as a teetotaler. So I learned to love bloody Maries. You know what the hell.

CM: Was it in here that you first got interested in social justice causes, civil rights?

CW: No, it was in Yale. Look, all this stuff in Yale when I went there was Let Justices Roll Down like Waters. Life is just like a mighty stream. And I had some great teachers there: Liston Pope, Richard Neibhur, and a number of other people. I had some fantastic teachers, and they were an inspiration. I think Richard Neibhur suffered more at the Second World War more than anybody I ever knew. He suffered over this. He and his brother were both great preachers. This guy, Richard, was more of a theologian's theologian. There was something I was remembering, I can't quite remember now. Do you want to ask me some questions?

CM: So these men, they inspired you by the way they lived their lives to try to do something?

CW: Well, it was not only that the way they lived their lives but their knowledge and mastery of fields and their commitment to something they had top notch teachers. You know that other schools that were big. You had Union Theological Seminary, you had Harvard Seminary and so on, but um Yale was a very distinctive school. So, I liked that.

CM: So, you graduated Yale, and then you came down to Maryland and got involved with Hopkins and Levering Hall. What brought you down, what was the attraction?

CW: Well, you know I had opportunity for various jobs, but the one that paid best was this, so what the hell, I wanted money. No, thing was I really came down here working for the Y. The YMCA owned Levering hall on the Hopkins's Campus. So I came down to work for the Y, but I was really working for the university. And, at levering Hall, it was really the student center, so that's really what I was doing was running that student center, and I also was teaching courses in religion and I was in charge of religious activities on the campus. So, that's not very exciting is it. But I tell you Hopkins, Levering Hall, influenced not only Hopkins, a hell of a lot, but also the city. And, we ran programs for instance, you know segregation was the story at Hopkins, the president of Hopkins University was a racist, there was no question about that, I had enough dealings with him to know what was going on. And one of the things that we tried to do there, was to change Hopkins, desegregate it. No women allowed, no blacks, only um a handful of Jews they allowed in. What we tried to do, we had some great students and so we did a tutoring program in the city, we had hundreds of people tutoring and in the city we had programs going all over the city with music, jazz. Jazz helped us. I don't know if you've heard of Brubeck?

CM: Mmm, hmm

CW: You've heard of uhh-

CM: Thelonious Monk, Miles Davis, ehhh....

CW: Oh Yeah, Johnny Mingus, Joan Baez. Let's see. Let's go for it, Duke Ellington.

CM: Mmm, hmm

CW: Mercer Ellington, Mingus, Thelonious Monk, Uh, a lot more. We brought these people to the city. The first big thing we did was in 1959 and uh in the um that was down in the uh...what the hell is the name of that, I forgot. But, that was the first big concert we had. For that one, we brought Dave Brubeck, we brought the guy...the Canadian, big band leader. You know who I'm talking about? No, you don't know your Jazz, do you?

CM: NO!! Actually, my stepfather was an incredible Jazz buff. The highlight of his life, he met Louis Armstrong on an airplane and he shook his hand and he didn't was his hand for over a week. It was the greatest moment of his life.

CW: Really?!?!

CM: I grew up listening to Sinatra, and...

CW: Really?

CM: And great Jazz and Big band and swing and stuff like that..

CW: Yeah

CM: So I'm very familiar with all these names that you keep...

CW: Well, let me think of the um, the first big concert that I...

CM: Was it Artie Shaw?

CW: We had, we brought concerts to the school. We brought Duke Ellington Twice, we brought his son once, Charlie Mingus, Thelonius Monk. We even went outside of Jazz, we brought Simon and Garfunkel, we brought Mamas and the Papas. We brought, what's his name? With Mothers of Invention. Was it Sam, no?

CM: Frank Zappa? Ha, he, ha....

CW: Yeah, with the Mothers of Invention. Look, we brought everybody. My memories just not working right now.

CM: Your memory is working great!

CW: And it was uh, you know. So were doing this, they haven't been doing this before to mixed audiences. And we did it all over the city in high school auditoriums.

CM: Wow.

CW: Oh, we had a great time. So, at the same time we were doing the tutoring and um. We opened a lot of doors; we had students that wanted to do stuff. And it was a great thing for me, it was a great gift for me to do work with this and to do work with civil rights. I went to jail with them in 63 when we integrated these, when we desegregated Quenella (?) Park. And um, I became president of the Black ministerial Alliance for a while in the seventies and uh, I had a marvelous time, this was a gift to me, to let me work with great people from the black community and to work with the students, and so, I, I had a marvelous time. I was lucky.

CM: Sounds like we were lucky.

CW: What?

CM: Sounds like we were lucky to have you.

CW: Well look, I um, as I said came out down here filled with the social gospel that Yale Divinity School taught me, let justice roll down like water and righteousness in a mighty stream. I had that's what I wanted to do and um, The University wanted to get rid of me. There was never any question about it that Eisenhower was not happy with me and um, because I worked with graduate students at Hopkins to raise hell with the university to do something about itself and clean itself up. So I had a good time working with these students and making the university, helping to make it change, desegregating it and this

was a marvelous thing for me to be able to come in and have a chance to try and work for something that was worthwhile. And then I, you know, I spent lots of time in Central America working with them and spent time in the soviet union trying to do something about peace and then with blacks about civil rights and um, so um, you know I , course I knew Martin Luther King and um, a lot of other people that were into things.

CM: Who was the first civil rights leader that you really got to know? It says something here, Mark laughed at me, it says tell me about Bayard Rustin.

CW: Uh what?

CM: Bayard Rustin.

CW: Well.

CM: Who was the leader you really started getting you involved in mainstream civil rights activities outside of just tutoring and all that?

CW: Well it would have been there were four black ministers that were really into the civil rights movement. Frank Williams, Bob Newbold, umm, see now, Marion Bascomb and um, Bascomb, Vernon, Vernon, Vernon Dobson. These were the guys. So I got to work with them and um, then I got to work with a lot of other people that were leading in the civil rights movement. And um, I suppose the thin. So it was just that was very important was that we had students who really wanted to do something kind of an opportune thing to get into. So we were doing things, we were running courses in the university. Criminal justice and corrections, juvenile delinquency and its treatment and uhhh, a number of other courses. We started a number of credit courses and were even using students in doing our teaching. And I worked out of social relations and so, things were open and you know, there was a big reserve of people who wanted to do and uhh, so we did what we could do. I've been talking too much.

CM: nah, you are doing great.

MS: This is incredible

CM: You want to take over?

CW: So listen, I can't talk too long.

CM: OK

MS: OK. Do you want to stop now or do you want to answer.

CW: GO ahead and ask me some questions.

MS: OK well then, umm, I know it is kind of a, it's not the happiest memory but on April 4th, at 6:01 PM Dr. King was assassinated. How did you first hear the news? What was your reaction?

CW: Well, of course it was such a calamitous thing and such a disaster. In Baltimore, umm, there were a lot of civil disorders and umm, what Agnew did now Agnew had been chairman of the county living out here. He had been living out here and then he was Governor you know. Agnew, what he did, you know, he blamed the umm, blamed the black ministers for being responsible for the civil disorders. So he attacked them publicly and I got a group together from all over the state and we demanded from him that he apologize for claiming that the black ministers had done nothing to stop this and we uhh, we made an ad. I was chairman of this committee for the whole state and we made an ad, and tried to put it into the Sun demanding that he apologize for making this statement about the preachers and um, the Sun would not take the ad. The Afro American took it so we ran a full page ad charging him with you know this false charge and we wanted him to apologize. Well of course he wouldn't do it. Now I met him on a number of occasions. See I lived here and he was running things and I was on the Human Relations Committee out here and I was in lots of meetings with him and so he really didn't like me I think. An um, so in any case there were a lot of other things and what not with Agnew.

MS: From what you can recall, thank you very much, that was very interesting. From what you can recall, you can recall about the riots that took place is there anything you can recall initially? What were some of the emotions that you felt? What if anything...

CW: Well, look. Martin Luther King came as such a saving figure.

MS: Of course.

CW : Such a marvelous man with this great charisma and uhh, very articulate and very charismatic and so, ahem, this killing of was something that was a hell of a disaster and people couldn't stand this because here was somebody who was going to lead them and um so that was it, he died. Now it was true, now probably, James Farmer was more involved here in Maryland than King was. I knew James Farmer pretty well and from CORE and I worked very closely with CORE especially with Walter Querer(?), and the , this was all related to Gwynn Oak park, I am not going to try to talk much more.

MS: I understand completely. Please don't.

CW: In any case, you know African Americans welcomed me into their midst to work with them. That meant a lot. It was a great thing that I could work with these people and you know I had a chance to work with people in Central America in Russia and in some other spots. In any case I've had a great life trying to do some things that were worthwhile. Where's my son, is he in there?

MS: He's in there. It's been a real honor to talk with you.

CW: See what he's, what he's did a joint MD/ PH at Vanderbilt and he was at an Indian Public health hospital nine years in Oklahoma now he's five years in Texas on the Mexican border. He's done his life working with people at the bottom of the ladder. Blacks, Mexicans. He's very fluent in Spanish, he's got nine clinics there, He's a good doctor, there's no question about that. He has to fly back tomorrow but he's helped me a lot because I've been sick and he works with the doctors up here in my case. So we are very proud of him. We have two other sons. One of them, he's a lawyer, he's really tops in his field in this country. Critical paths scheduling and contract law. The oldest son, he um, he took a graduate degree from Yale and he worked as a secretary for Governor in New York, I forgot his name. Well doesn't matter, in any case he's retired now. In any case we have three sons and we are proud of them. We've had a wonderful time with our sons, they've really made us so proud and uhh.

MB: What did your wife do? Did she play a part, what part did she play?

CW: She carried me.

CM, MS:Laughs.

CW: Well in a sense it's true. It was her backstopping and her help doing everything that made it possible for me to do stuff. She made a hell of a lot easier, especially with our sons and so Brian, he's sort of living this out now in Texas on the Mexican border dealing all the time with undocumented. That's primarily what he's doing, dealing with. So the middle one is a lawyer, he's very successful, the oldest one is retired and all of them have done good things we thought. I brag too much on my sons.

MS: No, it sounds like you have passed on a great legacy, its very important in this world.

CM: You've had the opportunity to take what you were given and touch other people's lives.

CW: Well.

CM: There's a line in the Bible where someone asked Paul, "How we will know Christians and he says you shall know us by our works." It sounds like that's what you've done.

CW: Well you know the umm, my sons and I don't always agree on everything but I've had a great time. Now the uh, I had polio in 48 and I, I learned to play golf after I had polio so I made all my sons play golf. Now this son, he's never forgiven for that. He swears he doesn't like golf, but he really does. Don't ask him about it because he'll go off and really give me hell.

MS: OK, it's our secret.

CW: But in any case we've had some great times together. Because he came along later, I spent more time with him. We went across the country and we took trail bikes. I had a trail bike, I wore that, I was a cripple. I rode that thing. A small trail bike. He had a large one so we would go across in a motor home and would stop and ride along deserted tracks and things like that. I shouldn't have done it, but I never fell. When I first came here I had a motor scooter and I did, have some trouble with that. I used to ride it from Towson to Hopkins and I wore an aviator suit in the wintertime. I must have looked like hell. But umm, I've had a lot of fun with our sons, more with the younger one than the older and he's helped me an awful lot. We've tried to help him and I think we have. But uh, so the oldest one now is retired and he's a diabetic, we found out he was a diabetic when he was four. So that was something he had to go through, but he, he got some marvelous children. I've probably talked enough.

MS: OK, this has been incredible. I can't thank you enough. Of course we'll send you a copy of the interview...

CW: sure...

MS: and you'll be hearing back from us.

CW: OK, that's good, please do and ..

MS: It's been a honor to meet with you and talk with you...

CW: Well thank you, thanks. I'm privileged to meet you guys and ...

MS, CM, MB: Thank you.

End of transcription