Scope and Background Note
In this oral history interview, Ralph Greer discusses his experiences at Central Elementary, Main Street Grammar and Union High schools, living conditions in Union Mill Village (which was located close to black neighborhoods), his work for Excelsior Mills while a student at Wofford College, his time spent recording Sims High Football games for the local radio station, and his 35 years of work for the Union Daily Times and Spartanburg Herald newspapers. Ralph Greer is an only child, born December 9, 1928 in Spartanburg, South Carolina. Tom Crosby interviewed Ralph Greer at his residence in Union, South Carolina, on July 17, 2009. Interview covers Greer's education at Central Elementary (of the town of Gaffney, S.C.), Main Street Grammar, and Union High Schools from the mid-1930s to 1946.
Tom Crosby: Today is July 17, 2009 and I’m in Union, South Carolina. I’m in the home of Mr. Ralph Greer. What was your date birth, sir?

Ralph Greer: I was born December 9, 1928.

TC: December 9th, 1928?

RG: Uh-huh.

TC: Are you originally from Union?

RG: No, I was born in Spartanburg but I’ve lived in Union most of my life.

TC: Okay. So you have brothers and sisters?

RG: No, I’m the only child.

TC: I see.

RG: And we moved to Union. My parents were from Union but when I was born my dad worked in Spartanburg and we lived in Spartanburg. And we left there and we went to Washington, Raleigh, Charlotte and all because he worked for a contractor, a plumbing contractor. He worked on the Walter Reed Hospital in Washington while they built it and some apartment complexes in Raleigh and Greensboro and in Charlotte. And then when it was time for me to start to school they decided that, you know, the type work he was in then he might have to pull up in the middle of the school year so they didn’t want that so we came back to Union. I’ve been in Union all my, I started first grade in Union.

TC: I see. What was the name of that school?

RG: I went to Central.

TC: Central?

RG: Central Elementary, which is now the library at USCU.
TC: University of South Carolina at Union.

RG: Uh-huh.

TC: Okay. Now there was a school on Main Street. That was an elementary school.

RG: That was Main Street. That was a middle school by the time I got, when I came. We went five and six at that school at Main Street. We called it grammar school. We went from elementary to grammar.

TC: That’s that the name of it, Main Street Grammar?

RG: Main Street Grammar School where the main building now is for USCU. And then I went to Union High School further on down East Main Street that was destroyed by fire.

TC: Right. And what year you graduated from Union High?

RG: In 1946.

TC: Nineteen forty-six?

RG: Uh-huh.

TC: Okay. Now you were telling me earlier today that you lived, what was that area?

RG: I lived on Union Mill in the Union Mill Village and right across from us was O’Shields Street and the other streets that was a black community too. So we grew up playing with.

TC: The black kids.

RG: And so I knew the kids that were playing football at Sims High School. And I went to see them; I watched them play down at the old city park.

TC: If I may interrupt, what was it, how did the kids get along, if I may ask, the black kids and the white kids?

RG: We got along fine. I’m serious, because a lot of times we didn’t have enough people to play ball. I’m talking about baseball and all. And they didn’t have enough. I mean our little neighborhood over there, so we played together.

TC: You played together?

RG: Sure we played together.

TC: Did some of the black kids play, black and white kids on the same team?

RG: Oh, yes. We just chose up sides and played.
TC: On the same team?

RG: Yeah because my grandfather and my grandmother had a field across the street from their house on Blassingame Street. Well, on one side of Blassingame Street were white people and on the other side of the street were black mostly and deeper, you know, deeper down O’Sheilds Street and down through there.

TC: Were they opposite of the black, the white houses were opposite of each other?

RG: Yeah, faced each other.

TC: Faced each other on the same street?

RG: Yeah and so Blassingame Street was like that. I mean at the top of the hill there was one white house and a store and all. But from there on down, other than that vacant field where we played ball and all, was black, black people lived there.

TC: It’s interesting to me. I never knew that in terms of that type of existence.

RG: Oh, sure. We played together.

TC: But I know as I grew up in Santuck, my mother knew, I don’t know whether you remember Mr. Smith Gregory.

RG: Uh-huh, yes.

TC: You remember him? Okay. He was a farmer and my parents did too and my mother would visit her quite often and it was just like another lady.

RG: Oh, sure.

TC: A lot of people don’t know that.

RG: Listen, the lady that took care of me when I was in first grade, second grade, you know, that age, while my parents worked, she stayed with us the whole time. She took care of my children.

TC: I see. If I may ask.

RG: Her name was Mary Norris.

TC: Mary Norris, yeah, I know some of those Norris’.

RG: And there was no finer lady in the world than Mary and so she took care of.

TC: If I may ask, what type of work did your parents do?
They worked in textiles.

TC: Textiles?

RG: Yes. He was a plumber but when he came back to Union he went into textiles and later he was a shift overseer and my mother she inspected cloth until she got sick and had to quit. But they were in textiles.

TC: Were there any black people working in the mill at that time other than maybe cleaning up?

RG: See I worked at Excelsior. When I graduated from high school I got a job that summer at Excelsior Mill, well, that fall. And then in 1950 I believe I went to work at Union Mill in the office. But yes, I was in shipping and the all the guys in shipping were black.

TC: They were?

RG: Yes.

TC: If I may ask, that was more demanding, more difficult kind of work or it was just a different kind of work?

RG: It was a different kind of work but they were, they loaded the trucks. They kept track of the finished materials and which ones to load and this, that, and the other.

TC: Now there were no white guys working in that area?

RG: The overseer and, of course, I worked but all I had to do was to check the loads.

TC: I see. You were an accounting person, accountable person?

RG: Yes, I checked, in other words, each bale that was loaded had a number on it and we had to make sure that particular bale went to that particular place. It had to be stenciled that way. They did their own, I’m talking about his wasn’t manual work. They stenciled the bales, they did everything. I mean, you know, it wasn’t something that somebody that wasn’t educated could do. No, sir. They stenciled the bales. They put the numbers on the bales and they were responsible for.

TC: Their work.

RG: Yes, sir.

TC: Now you went to, you attended Union High School?

RG: Yes.

TC: And those kids that you played with went to Sims High School?

RG: Sims High School.
TC: Which was an all black school?

RG: Right.

TC: At that time.

RG: Uh-huh.

TC: If I may ask, what was it like let’s say walking to school and maybe was there interaction between the blacks and white kids?

RG: No there wasn’t because of the fact we went in different directions. So there wasn’t, in other words, they went to Sims and we went the other direction. But we walked to school everyday.

TC: And you’d be walking with them?

RG: If we went to school but see they went to Sims, which was.

TC: I know but I’m saying a certain distance or maybe a short distance or whatever.

RG: You could have. Sure you would, sure.

TC: Yeah.

RG: But we walked to school everyday.

TC: As many of them did, most of them.

RG: Oh, sure they did.

TC: Did you ever ride the school bus or not?

RG: No, see you had to live.

TC: In ’46 you didn’t have school buses?

RG: Well, they had school buses but you had to live more than so many miles away from school to ride the bus. So we didn’t live far enough away to ride a bus so we had to walk.

TC: Excuse me. I think buses in South Carolina I read that Governor Thurmond in 1948 was when buses became available. Maybe that was for, ’46, ’48, maybe I guess you’re talking about after the buses became available for black and white.

RG: Actually there were school buses then but you had to live so far away from school to qualify so nobody living in the city of Union that went to Central School for instance or Main
Street School or Union High School qualified to ride the bus because really you weren’t far enough away.

**TC:** Excuse me. Are you talking about around 1946?

**RG:** Yes, sir. Yes, sir. There were buses.

**TC:** Now were those buses state supported at that time, do you know or you’re not sure?

**RG:** I don’t know but I’m sure.

**TC:** They may have been. What I read said that South Carolina didn’t get buses until 1948. Now maybe that was a statewide thing.

**RG:** It could have been.

**TC:** And it could have been private buses in certain places too.

**RG:** Yeah. But as far as I know, I’m trying to think we had buses.

**TC:** I’m not sure myself but I’ll ask somebody who might. You know, you can’t remember everything right now.

**RG:** Yeah.

**TC:** Okay so now and then you finished Union High and then what after that if I may ask?

**RG:** Well, I went to work at Excelsior and went to Wofford at night and then went to work at Union Mill in the office. And then I left there and went with radio in 1957. In the meantime I moved, we moved to Spartanburg and I worked for Goodyear Tire and Rubber Company probably from ’54 to ’57.

**TC:** Okay so you didn’t start recording, taping the Sims High School?

**RG:** Not until ’57.

**TC:** Until ’57?

**RG:** Right, see the radio came here in ’49 and I’m sure they were already doing it. But in ’57 when I joined up that was part of my job.

**TC:** I see. Now you don’t know where any of the tapes are now?

**RG:** No, I’m sure that we just recorded over top of them because there wasn’t any reason to save them if you stop and think about it. And everybody, times back then were like they are now; times were tight, so however much the reel cost, we used them until they wore out.
TC: I see.

RG: What might have a ballgame on it today might have commercials all on it tomorrow.

TC: Now what day of the week did you record Sims High School, which was a black school?

RG: Yeah, we recorded them, they played on Thursday nights and we recorded them on Thursday night due to the fact that the station was not on the air at night. We could not broadcast live. So the same held true for the white school, Union High School, because we were prohibited from broadcasting at night because of the license that the radio station had.

TC: Well, now you recorded the games.

RG: We taped the games.

TC: At night?

RG: We did a play by play.

TC: I remember.

RG: We did play by play and then, of course, back in those days not that many people could travel, especially out of town.

TC: I’m not sure I’m quite following here. You said the station went off at night.

RG: Yes.

TC: But the games were played at night.

RG: Yes, but see we tape recorded them. We did it. We taped them live, so to speak. He called every play that was played and then we replayed that tape on Saturday morning. And you could listen to the entire ballgame if you, even though you already knew what the score was. I mean if you were that interested you’d know before then who had won that night. And we did Union High School the same way.

TC: Right. Now who paid for the taping of the games?

RG: There were sponsors and different businesses and that was mainly what I did was did the commercials and helped the announcer because the play by play man was one of the best that I’ve ever known in high school or anywhere else.

TC: What was his name?

RG: His name was Tom Cabaniss and he died recently.

TC: Cabaniss?
RG: Cabaniss, Tom Cabaniss.

TC: How do you spell Cabaniss?

RG: C-A-B-A-N-I-S-S, Cabaniss, and he was as good and I’ll give you a good example of that. We went to Woodruff and our boss man refused to pay a thirty-five dollar fee to use the press box. So for the first half they wouldn’t allow us in the press box. For the first half we just stayed down in the end zone. And Tom had made an agreement with, got an agreement with somebody running a concession stand there to use the electricity, to use a plug-in and we plugged in our equipment, our tape recorder and he called the second half of the ballgame from that position, from the concession stand. And I asked him I said why are we doing this. He said I’m going to call the first half when I get back to Union. He came back to Union, put some crowd noise, a record with crowd noise on it, and called the first half of that ballgame, put it with the second half that he called live, so to speak, and nobody ever knew the difference.

TC: Creative.

RG: That’s how good he was. That’s how good he was at what he did.

TC: Right.

RG: He was good and he knew he was good but people in that communications field they have a lot of, you know, they think a lot of themselves, and Tom thought a lot of himself. And I’m not talking about him, he was my classmate, but.

TC: He was good.

RG: He was good. He was that good. And we even called that night, that morning we called the coach, Union High School coach and asked them would they listen to it and so then they wanted to know why we wanted them to listen to it because they couldn’t tell any difference in it.

TC: Now at one point Sims High was playing its football games where, physically they were playing where?

RG: At city park.

TC: At the city park?

RG: That was before my radio days but that was when I was.

TC: Fifteen, sixteen?

RG: Yeah and when I was in high school they played at, well, when Coach Moorer came they played at city park.

TC: So you remember when he came?
RG: Yes, and I remember it because he had these weird plays and what he always did.

TC: If I may, he came in 1946.

RG: He came in ’46 so I’ve been told.

TC: And his weird plays?

RG: And you reminded me and they played at city park.

TC: What was it like, that park?

RG: Well, it was a baseball field and, of course, most of the people stood on the sidelines because of the fact that to sit in the stands you would have been mostly looking down in the end zone, as opposed to watching the play from the sidelines. So most people stood and I remember that. And, of course, when we started playing they played at Union High School called Clifford Field.

TC: That was the name of the Union High field?

RG: Clifford Field and it was named after somebody there.

TC: Noted person I guess.

RG: Uh-huh.

TC: So now do you remember when Sims started playing at Union High field or you don’t recall?

RG: No, sir. I can’t remember to save my life but I do know that’s where they were playing because I never recall a ballgame at Union, I mean at.

TC: See I was in the ninth grade in 1960 and, no, I was in the ninth grade in 1956 and I remember playing there for one year and then we got the new Sims High School.

RG: Right.

TC: And then, of course, we had our own stadium and then we started playing there.

RG: Yeah.

TC: So when Sims was playing at Union High’s field.

RG: Like I’m saying, maybe we didn’t play at Union High School. See I had to go to, we called both games and I cannot remember and it’s been bugging me to death ever since I talked to you earlier.
TC: So you may not have?

RG: We might not have played.

TC: Worked on Union High field.

RG: Well, actually I don’t.

TC: Because see Sims stopped playing there in 1956. Sims stopped playing there in 1956.

RG: Okay, well, we played.

TC: Because Sims had its own stadium then.

RG: Right, well, see since I didn’t go until ’57 it was at their stadium, not Union.

TC: Yeah, so you weren’t there at all.

RG: Not at Union, I’m sorry.

TC: Okay.

RG: Like I said, it’s hard to remember. So much water has gone under the dam.

TC: You got two schools to try to remember.

RG: Yeah.

TC: What was it like, any interesting should I say any interesting games or incidents that may have taken place?

RG: Well, it was, anytime that you talked to Coach Moorer was interesting and I loved to go and talk with him just about anything and everything. But he was one of the nicest gentlemen I’ve ever known and he did a lot of stuff. He told me one time that a lot of that stuff that he pulled, I mean the different plays and all, he did to test to see how far he could go because he wanted the white league and the black league, so to speak, to be equal and to be the same. I mean have the same rules and everything. And, of course, and sometimes he’d break the rule just to see if he could get away with it but he would call attention to the fact that he broke the rule. But I mean by doing that just by some of the plays that he played that might not have been.

TC: Rules for the game.

RG: Yes, yes, uh-huh.

TC: That he shouldn’t have done.
RG: Yeah. And I spent a lot of time with him just talking and he told me, he told me about how he went and had to beg for hand-me-down uniforms.

TC: From Union High School.

RG: From Union High School and things of that nature but he was one more fine gentleman.

TC: Right.

RG: And I thoroughly enjoyed knowing him. You’ve probably, hopefully other people have told you this because they played at Gaffney one night and they won but they didn’t win by as much as he wanted them to win by. So when he got to the Union County line he stopped the bus and put them all off the bus and told them all he was required to do was to bring them back to Union and that sign said Union. And the bus would be waiting I forget how many miles down the road and the bus would be there for X number of minutes and anybody wanted to ride better be there. And he made them walk part of the way back.

TC: I see. You don’t know how long, how far?

RG: No, a mile or two but anyway that tale has always been told.

TC: Yeah, I’ve heard that.

RG: And I’ll say one thing too, he has played them and if he didn’t like how they played he would take them back down to Sims.

TC: After the game?

RG: After the game and practice them on that same night.

TC: I’ve heard that one too.

RG: Yeah, he did that too.

TC: If I may ask you also, did you know Prof. Sims, Reverend Sims?

RG: Just I met him.

TC: Just hearing the name?

RG: Yes and I met him and I’ve seen him and all but I never did talk with him, you know.

TC: You never talked to him?

RG: I don’t think I did.
TC: I see. If I may ask you at this point, you mentioned Mr. Moorer, how he interacted with people.

RG: It didn’t make any difference.

TC: What race?

RG: What race, creed, color, sideways, he was respected by everybody that I’ve ever know. I’ve never heard one person say a word against that gentleman. I’m serious.

TC: The reason I made that comment is Prof. Sims, for whom the school is named, he came to Union in 1905 and after one year he got a new school built called Macbeth Elementary. You remember that name?

RG: Uh-huh.

TC: Okay, and even prior to then, well, I have to change here a little. He came to Union in 1905 and after one year he got that new school built called Macbeth School and sometime after that he invited the Fisk Jubilee Singers from Fisk University up in Nashville, Tennessee, he invited them to Union to sing and they sang in the courthouse. And I got this from the Union Daily Times’ article. And he had said that half of the seats, the article in the paper, that half of the seats were reserved for whites. And then another time when we had the dedication of the old Sims High now, the one that was built in 1927, he indicated that half of the seats at the dedication, half of the seats had been reserved for whites. You mentioned about how Mr. Moorer was able to interact with both races.

RG: Apparently he was too.

TC: Prof Sims was too so that leads me to this question if I may. And also when I was in high school when the homecoming parade for Sims, Sims High, or the Christmas parade, when Sims’ band would come down the street, of course, a lot of people there, both black and white, and the white persons would be proud of Sims just like they would yell.

RG: Yes, sir. That’s always been the, I always noticed that. I never saw any bitterness or anything like that because they were just as proud of that band as they were the other one. They really were. I think the only trouble that I ever recall in all this was back in the, I can’t remember when it was but I was.

TC: Was that the integration period?

RG: Yes.

TC: That was 1970.

RG: Yeah. But when somebody threw a rock through a window at Union High School and hit a teacher in the head and that brought a special squad of highway patrol in here. This was before
the special teams, special units, but this was a special unit. But it was already integrated but they...

TC: Caused a little problem then?

RG: Yes because they were objecting to the playing of “Dixie” at the ballgames.

TC: I see. I was not aware of that.

RG: Yeah and somebody threw a brick or a rock through a window and this special unit came here and there was a lot of fires set, nothing, trashcans.

TC: But as you say, this was during the integration period, early period. RG: Right, right, it must have been. I can’t remember. I was working for the Spartanburg Herald so it was in the ‘60s sometime or in the ‘70s sometime. I’ve lost all track of time. But it lasted a while, lasted a few days and it went away and nothing was ever done about it.

TC: The reason I had mentioned about Prof. Sims and his interaction with both races and Mr. Moorer, my point is this. I think athletics contributed to interaction among the races.

RG: Oh, I’m sure. Sure, I’m sure of that.

TC: And civility among the races.

RG: Yeah, somebody has probably told you that there was a world of white spectators at their ballgames because they played a better brand of football than.

TC: Than Union High.

RG: Than Union High School.

TC: Yeah, more exciting, interesting.

RG: Yeah, they did. That’s a good word. They were exciting to watch and to have that streak going.

TC: Yeah, that streak, yeah. Are you aware or did Moorer ever tell you about some, what is it, football camps, workshops that he attended? I think Lombardi, wasn’t that a football player?

RG: Oh, yes, Vince Lombardi.

TC: He went to some of his workshops I understand.

RG: He was Green Bay Packers I think it was. No, I don’t recall but I do know that his teams were always exciting. I mean his games were. They really were.
TC: Okay.

RG: I’m just sorry I can’t remember anymore but like I said, it’s been a long time.

TC: It’s been a few months.

RG: Yes, it has.

TC: No, no, I understand. We can’t remember everything but you remembered a lot.

RG: Had a lot of things, lot of water has gone under the bridge.

TC: That’s the truth.

RG: And it just, you know, they weren’t any drugs. There wasn’t drinking and drugs and all that kind of stuff anywhere. I’m talking about.

TC: Just a little moonshine now and then.

RG: Yeah but like it is today.

TC: Oh, no, society has changed so much.

RG: It has.

TC: The family structure, you know, and so forth. Do you have any additional comments that you’d like, maybe something that you forgot to say?

RG: I don’t. I don’t think and I was trying. What I would suggest, if I can find somebody that might remember more I’ll be in touch with you because I might, now that I’ve been made aware of it, I might run across somebody who went to the ballgames too, you know.

TC: But I appreciate it.

RG: Because Union has always been a sports minded place and they didn’t particularly care who was playing as long as somebody was playing and was exciting to watch.

TC: They’d be there.

RG: That’s right, they would.

TC: Now someone told me about how Mr. Moorer would take his team to see Union High.

RG: See Union High School play, yes, sir.

TC: On Friday night.
**RG:** Right, he would. I had forgotten about that but you’re right, he did. But he was a very, very.

**TC:** I think he also took them to see college games too. I know he did because I read it.

**RG:** Probably at Wofford and Newberry and around, you know, somewhere close. I’m sure he did.

**TC:** And Allen and South Carolina State and so forth, right.

**RG:** But he was a most remarkable person, he really was.

**TC:** Okay, well, I certainly appreciate your time and your interest.

**RG:** Well, like I said, I’m just sorry I couldn’t help you anymore than I did.

**TC:** Oh, no, you’ve done a fine job. And also I want to say than you worked for the Union Daily Times for a number years.

**RG:** Yes, actually I’m retired officially from the New York Times, which owns the Spartanburg Herald where I was there for thirty-five years.

**TC:** Right.

**RG:** And they bought us out in 1985 and I worked for them until I retired in ’95 and then I edited a little weekly paper over in Spartanburg County for a couple of years. And then I came back to Union and went to work at the Union Times in about 2000 I think it was and worked until the end of 2008 when they cut down.

**TC:** Now you did a very good article for me on the Rosenwald schools. Do you remember?

**RG:** Yes.

**TC:** That was 2005 or 6 somewhere like that. I’m still working on that project.

**RG:** Bless your heart. I always, you know, I’ve been in this business a long time and would still be in it now if the situation. See when I first went out there we had about twenty people involved in the news. There are five out there now.

**TC:** That’s a drastic reduction.

**RG:** Yeah, yes, sir. And see all the printing has been moved to Newberry.

**TC:** Well, I think an article is going to come out today, I think it’s today. If not today most likely it will definitely be next week. I think I said to you before.
**RG:** About the school?

**TC:** About the new school being built down on the Whitmire highway. It’s a middle school but to keep the name Sims going, they’re going to name it Sims Middle School. So the ninth through the eleventh of October we’re having an all-classes Sims High School reunion and I certainly invite you to be present if you have time.

**RG:** That sounds like a really nice thing. But I think the name should continue. I really do.

**TC:** Yeah, well, they’re going to do that. So again I wish to thank you for your time and your interest.

**RG:** Yes, sir, I was delighted to do it.

**TC:** Thank you. I appreciate it. You’ve done a great job. Thank you.

End of interview