

Ruffins

Q: . . . so we had Bill sort of describe the [others], but one of the questions we didn't ask Bill was what do you think when people encounter the lunch [00:00:19] counter in the museum, what do you think they miss? Are there things that they— Is there something about the lunch counter [00:00:25], a message that visitors might not get?

Ruffins: I think one of the things about the lunch counter is that objects— Some objects— Let me start over. Some objects [00:00:42] are very evocative in the form itself. You can look at it and it tells you something very specific about where it came from and why it exists. [00:00:53] The lunch counter I think is not one of those objects because when you look at it, you see a lunch counter of a particular time from [00:01:00] the '50s, '60s, and that— You just see that lunch counter and you might wonder why is that even in the museum. What's important about that? You really need to see [00:01:12] the photographs or maybe a film like parts of "Eyes on the Prize" or other kinds of contextual information to understand the significance of the lunch counter and so it [00:01:27] points to the notion that seeing objects in context adds so much information to why they're important and to even interpret them or to understand what they are to [00:01:36] begin with.

An ironic aspect of objects like the lunch counter for people who are young and who don't remember or didn't live in this era is that the objects [00:01:53] themselves can seem very tame and it's very difficult to understand if you're 10 or 15 years old and I have teenage children, why people— what about this [00:02:09] generated such intense feelings. Why were people willing to risk tremendous pain and humiliation and why were other people willing to hurt and humiliate people [00:02:30] over such ordinary objects and the lunch counter, a water fountain, a school door, there're many objects like that from the civil rights movement that when [00:02:44] you look at it just as an object, you think— you can wonder what about this was so important that some people were willing to die over this and other people [00:02:55] were willing to kill people over this and you can't tell that just from the object.

Even words I think fail to convey the intensity of this experience and [00:03:09] therefore you need really photographs and better yet, film because what can't be replicated is this intensity. The scenes of people huddled around [00:03:24] what were initially four students but more people do come and help them and sit with them, but the crowds of people yelling and screaming at them and pouring [00:03:36] things on them and otherwise humiliating them, why were people willing to do that? To be recorded doing that? What about what was so intense? [00:03:47] That's the thing that's really difficult to convey and this is one of the complex aspects of presenting history about the modern civil rights movement. [00:03:58]

Q: That's great. That's wonderful. I always sort of wondered and sort of part of the literature deals with this, but if you have [00:04:06] a thought on why Greensboro. Or about the community out of which these young men came that would prepare them to make this [00:04:17] statement in 1960.

Ruffins: It's an interesting thing to say why Greensboro. The way I would start out is by saying that it could've happened almost anywhere [00:04:29] that had a black college and that's one of the important things to understand about Greensboro. The students from North Carolina A&T which people colloquially call [00:04:40] A&T, Agricultural & Technical College, now a university, black colleges in the south represented nodes of aspiration and achievement and it is [00:04:56] different when you look across the history, the landscape of the south, places that had black colleges are different than places that don't have historically [00:05:06] black colleges.

Greensboro— AT&T was a— Is not a particular well-known college generally in the United States, but it was a well-known college among people, among African Americans or colored people or Negroes as they were more typically called then. It was in the sort of near [00:05:30] the top tier of black colleges and there were many— It had many graduates from all around the country, not just from North Carolina, so students who went to A&T [00:05:45] saw themselves as part of a tradition and they had great pride in this school and were people who saw themselves as potential [00:05:58] community leaders as would most people who were going to black colleges because most African Americans then did not attend college and many— among many Americans [00:06:07] college attendance was still far less than 50% of people in the sort of 18 to 25 age group in the '50s and '60s and [00:06:19] went to college so to go to college, to graduate from college automatically meant that you were part of a bigger— a group of people who either were in the [00:06:28] middle class or were very likely to be able to have professional jobs and therefore be leaders in their communities, so you see four young men who are on [00:06:39] the upward trajectory towards leadership who represent the aspirations of their families, who see themselves as the future and we are talking about people [00:06:57] who were just older than the baby boom.

This is an important thing to understand. If you were 18 or 20 in 1960, you were born in 1942, 1940. It's the [00:07:08] generation of people who were just above the age of the baby boomers, people who probably remembered from childhood World War II and who had seen [00:07:18] their family's fortunes either rise or not rise after World War II, so they're a part of a generation of people who are— who see new opportunities for black people [00:07:31] in the United States and all of those factors coming together, then you add the youth part, the notion that young people perhaps at all times, but certainly [00:07:44] at that time felt that that change was possible, that they didn't have to put up with what their parents and grandparents had put up with, [00:07:53] that it was really possible to do and be differently in the United States as a black person, that they could stand up and resist and take risks which their parents [00:08:07] who might have lost their jobs or who might've lost property, that they were freer to take certain kinds of risks.

In many cases, the [00:08:20] parents of these students were appalled that they did things like that because the parents in many cases felt that these— their kids were risking their [00:08:30] futures, you know, a reasonable, fine, upstanding person didn't get arrested, so

risking arrest was risking your future so they really were making, in [00:08:45] addition to a statement about civil rights, they were making a generational statement.

Q: I find sort of in working with high school teachers that they [00:08:55] seem to— I don't know whether they recognize this or not, but students see sort of landmark people and landmark events in the civil rights movement and [00:09:05] sort of failed to grasp the long _____

Ruffins: Yes.

Q: Of this and so I wonder if we can talk about a sort of the immediate [00:09:14] consequences of this sitting down on February 1st and then sort of the longer term. It's not like segregation goes away the next day.

Ruffins: Right. [00:09:25] The immediate consequences of the sit-in are that, first, they close this store and then they decide that they're going to reopen this store and that [00:09:35] it's going to be integrated when they reopen, so in a limited sense, they win that battle, that [00:09:42] specific battle. In the near-term future, after this event, this event sparks other sit-ins, mostly by college students in other parts of the south, [00:10:02] some of which are less successful in a sense that they don't immediately result or quickly result in integration of that setting. In some [00:10:08] cases, places are just closed and are never reopened, but it does spark a variety of sit-ins around innumerable college towns across [00:10:17] the south and in recognizing that there're all of these people in different places who're not in communication with each other who are moved to do a similar [00:10:28] thing, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference which had been formed by Martin Luther King and a group of other Baptist ministers in 1957 decide that they're [00:10:40] going to hold like a conference and this is an aspect of the civil rights movement that many people don't get.

They would hold these conferences that [00:10:53] are a lot like sort of church retreats. They used the format or the social form of a church retreat. They would call a meeting, so they call [00:11:06] a meeting and many of these students from these various places come to that meeting and as a result of that meeting, a new organization is formed and that organization is known [00:11:18] colloquially as SNCC. It stood for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee which the initials were SNCC so people just sort of characterized [00:11:29] that as SNCC, so out of the sit-in movement a very different youth-led civil rights organization emerges, very quickly actually, within a couple of months [00:11:44] after the Greensboro sit-in, so a new factor enters the landscape of the civil rights movement, one that is not primarily church-based as the Southern Christian [00:11:56] leadership Conference was, not primarily focused on legal challenges as the NAACP was and one that was committed to direct action which [00:12:12] meant nonviolent resistance to segregation laws in the form of things like boycotts, sit-ins, demonstrations, and eventually they moved to activities [00:12:29] such as voter registration.

What makes it, characterizes it as such a— as the burgeoning of what emerges throughout the decade of the 1960s [00:12:44] and into 1970s which is youth-led social movements, the SNCC organization really is one of the first, if not the first of this time, and because it's led by college students, [00:13:02] it starts out as a— It's led by people who are very highly educated. It's led by people who are reading philosophy and debating with their parents [00:13:16] and faculty. This was not popular among the faculty members of most of these black colleges and a number of these students, maybe not in 1960 but ultimately are [00:13:27] forced to leave school because the faculty members or the administration of the school felt that these students might be endangering the school [00:13:39] itself.

North Carolina A&T, for example, is a public school. It was supported by public funds and they rightly feared that the government of the [00:13:49] state of North Carolina would not continue to support them to the level that they had if they were to be seen as encouraging these students, so [00:14:00] this puts these students in opposition to a lot of the adults in their environment, the church leaders, the teachers, the parents, but they [00:14:17] surged forward and become part of a tremendous change in American life.

Now, the long-term change, yes, segregation, legal segregation [00:14:26] absolutely comes to an end legally in 1964 with the Civil Rights Act and 1965 with the Voting Rights Act. Socially, in many [00:14:38] places, formal de facto segregation lingers well into the 1970s. There are some people who would argue that the United States has become resegregated [00:14:50] today, but even if you don't accept that argument, it is certainly true that it was years before some of the most egregious aspects of segregation fall [00:15:05] away or are ended, practices are ended, so this has both an immediate sort of medium-term and then long-term outcome. Those people, many of whom are [00:15:19] still alive today, they're people in their 60s, 70s some of them, many of those people went on to life-long careers of activism, so in their personal [00:15:30] lives, these times were— they were tremendously important to them. They came to a fork in the road and their whole lives were different as a result [00:15:42] of their participation in this movement.

Q: We also have sort of been asking some questions about curators as curators and so if you were [00:15:55] to put together an exhibit with the lunch counter, what would you like to put with it?

Ruffins: I've actually put together exhibits that didn't have that [00:16:08] lunch counter in it, but were exhibitions about the modern civil rights movement. One of the interesting things about the modern civil rights movement is that so far there is not [00:16:24] a lot of material culture that's available and part of that has to do with the circumstances of the movement so that when people went to a demonstration and they made— [00:16:36] they brought their hand-made signs, there wasn't a curator there saying, oh, let's be sure to keep your hand-made signs [00:16:43] so 40 years later we can put it in a museum. Many of the clothes that people wore, particularly these young people, were just wearing the ordinary clothes that [00:16:51] they were wearing. They didn't have like a special union garment or something that they were wearing or a special hat that was made

[00:16:58] for the demonstration. They often were wearing clothes that they might have worn to class. If you look at the people who were sitting— The young [00:17:07] men who come to sit in and the other people who join them, they're quite well dressed, very appropriately dressed to attend a [00:17:17] college classroom. Women are wearing—at that time, women were wearing dresses and, you know, nylons and high heels and young [00:17:25] men are wearing coats and ties and jackets and nice pants.

Later, as the movement progresses and they become more involved in working with particularly [00:17:38] rural communities, you see more of them wearing jeans and you see more of them wearing work shirts. Most of those people didn't save those jeans or work shirts. [00:17:48] They wore them until they wore out and then they got rid of them and got some more, so one of the aspects of doing an exhibition about the civil rights movement is that you often fall [00:17:58] back on photographs and film which makes it somewhat different from the traditional curatorial role focusing on three-dimensional objects. Personally, I [00:18:12] think that this is a false distinction, you know, I think images and photographs and film are artifacts, too. They take up time and space and they [00:18:26] exist as material things, but how you access that information is a little bit different.

Often civil rights exhibitions are largely photographic. The [00:18:37] interpretive point about that that is crucial is that the visuals, particularly television, through the medium of television, was absolutely central in why the modern [00:18:51] civil rights movement succeeded to the extent that it did. The fact that live television or very short delays, that something could happen in Greensboro, North Carolina [00:19:03] or in Birmingham, Alabama and later that same day people all over the country could see it on NBC, CBS, ABC, the television networks [00:19:12] that were free if you had a television, made the possibility of social response far more immediate so people— Something could happen in the morning and people could see [00:19:24] it on the evening news and they could volunteer. They could go to that location. They could send funds. They could respond and possibly change the ongoing [00:19:34] event. That's very different than civil rights activities that took place earlier in the 20th century in which a person might've been alone and maybe they had [00:19:42] a court case, but it would be months or years before anyone would really know what was happening. That is a very long way of saying what would I put [00:19:51] around the lunch counter.

One, you would need to use photographs. Two, you would need to use footage and there is a fair bit of footage that's available. It's [00:20:02] not inexpensive to get the rights to it, but because these networks filmed a lot of things, those kinds of sources, that kind of evidence, is [00:20:16] very crucial. What I would do which I think is done in the *Brown v. Board* exhibition very well is that it's important to show that it's part of a historical [00:20:24] process, so you can start with an earlier moment which involves documents and involves books, court cases, in some cases there are artifacts such as [00:20:44] rooms or tables or desks that people used, clothes that a lawyer might have worn or a person might've worn. All of those kinds of things, the traditional [00:20:57] notion of everything material that is surrounding the object in its original context could be used to demonstrate what went [00:21:11] on.

Some people would go to the extent of using mannequins to show what really happened. In this particular [00:21:18] case, I don't think personally mannequins would be that helpful because I think that it would be difficult to, again, replicate the vehemence of the situation and [00:21:28] therefore film is really a better mechanism but I would want to show the notion that sit-ins are not new. There— People were sitting-in in [00:21:39] the 19th century. Sit-ins are not new. It's not new for young people to be involved. It's not new to have resistance, but this movement succeeds [00:21:54] in ending legal segregation so it becomes a crescendo of activity and so I would want to show the pathway that led up to it and also the complexity [00:22:06] of the movement itself so that while some people are sitting in, other people are demonstrating, other people are filing legal cases, that there's a huge spectrum [00:22:16] of activity in which the lunch counter is just one node of that activity.

Q: As a curator, do you feel like there are particular complications and interpretive questions [00:22:30] involved in focusing on the lunch counter being this sort of highly symbolic piece that people are attracted to?

Ruffins: I do think there're problems because you can't [00:22:45] read in the object itself why it's important, so it means that you have to use a lot of words if you don't have photographs or you don't have much film footage. [00:22:56] You have to use a lot of words to try and convey what occurred and why it was significant so that is something— In this case, I think the object is [00:23:08] not as evocative of why we think it's important. Something it is evocative of, though, is the ordinariness of the setting. [00:23:23] I know that Bill talked about the fact that this was a sort of premier Woolworths and that's true.

At the same time, we would [00:23:36] say that having a hamburger at your local five and dime wasn't the apogee of eating in the United States at that time. This was actually a very [00:23:49] ordinary kind of activity that, you know, sort of run-of-the-mill kind of thing that you would be downtown shopping, maybe at a nicer store, but you needed [00:23:59] some fabric or you needed some thread or you needed some office paper. The Woolworths stores which don't in that form exist anymore in the United States [00:24:11], it's very evocative of a kind of moment in commercial culture and the consumer culture, the culture of shopping and eating, the idea [00:24:20] that you're going to sit on essentially what looks like a bar stool and eat at a cafeteria counter and have a humble ordinary sort of meal. It's not [00:24:34] the Cordon Bleu. You're having a hamburger and some French fries and a hot dog and maybe some ice cream. This was really ordinary American [00:24:42] life. It was the stuff of every-day life.

In a way that is a very useful thing to convey about what the significance [00:24:58] of the civil rights movement because something that was so ordinary, so in a way banal really, could be the subject of such intense [00:25:06] protection. It didn't cost a lot of money to eat. You know, Woolworth was a kind of store that people called five and dimes and that was because with [00:25:18] a nickel and a dime you could go there and buy something. I'm old enough to remember that you could buy 15 pieces of candy with

your nickel and [00:25:26] a dime and a hamburger might've only cost 25 cents. This was every-day accessible to everybody. You didn't have to be rich. You didn't have [00:25:37] to be dressed up to go there, yet this was an ordinary thing that was denied black people simply by virtue of what they looked like.

Additionally, [00:25:49] and if you were to use mannequins or you were to have pictures, I would certainly use before and after pictures. That's something that I think [00:25:56] would be very interesting to see. What did it look like to have the ordinary white customer sitting down at the Woolworths before the [00:26:04] sit-in? Well, one of the things you would see is that at many Woolworth counters and at many similar counters in the south, the people who worked [00:26:10] there were black. The people who cooked were black, so you really have a situation in which black people are present in the environment but only as servants. They are [00:26:24]— They cannot be consumers, so partially what is at stake is for black people to move from the role only of servants to the role of consumer in this [00:26:41] setting and the commercial aspects of the civil rights movement were that the way in which the civil rights movement stood in the way of ordinary business is part of why it [00:26:54] succeeds.

In other words, if you couldn't keep running this Woolworth counter making whatever amount of money it was making and I think that it was one [00:27:06] of the most profitable Woolworths in the country, if you couldn't keep running this, if this was going to prevent you from making your ordinary money, [00:27:16] eventually this collapsed this system of segregated shopping and consuming collapsed and it collapsed partially because of the economic impact. [00:27:29] You see this very much in boycotts. You see it demonstrations and you see it in sit-ins.

The Montgomery bus boycott which preceded the [00:27:38] lunch counter sit-ins by four and five years works because it turns out lots of black people ride the buses in Montgomery and if they aren't riding the bus, the bus company can't [00:27:49] make any money and eventually they have to stop. Those kinds of differences, the fact that there was a direct commercial impact on the company had something [00:28:02] to do with why this sit-in works.

Q: I have other sort of artifacts kind of questions, but I wanted to ask you sort of more about your role as a [00:28:22] curator and how you got interested in these subjects and sort of some of your day-to-day activities and those sorts of things. Can you tell us something [00:28:32] about _____

Ruffins: Well, one of the things— Let me start over in a different place. Why did I get— As in why did I decide to become a curator [00:28:45] as opposed to, say, an academic historian in a university? Okay. I'm thinking of the most positive spin.

Q: It's sort of the flip side of that [00:29:01] is as a curator, how do you choose the stuff that you decide to work on?

Ruffins: Okay. Well, I'll say a little bit about the first thing. The first thing [00:29:11] I would say is one of the interesting things about being a curator and being a public historian is that you're interacting with the general public which is [00:29:21] not true in a university. In universities, you're mostly interacting with your colleagues and students, so you're in a rarified environment and there're [00:29:26] wonderful things about that, but when you're in a museum, particularly a large museum like this, one that's free, you run the spectrum of people from grandmothers [00:29:41] to little children, from people of all ethnic backgrounds, people of all educational levels, people who are from the United States and people who're from other countries, so you have [00:29:48] an extraordinarily rich diverse group of people to interact with about culture. That's one of the things that's interesting about it is that you can potentially [00:30:05] speak to everyone, but you can also speak to different kind of niches of people simultaneously so that's a really interesting aspect of being a [00:30:15] public historian.

In terms of why did I become interested or what is interesting about working with material culture, intellectually I would say that while [00:30:33] there are interesting things that you can learn about the unusual person, let's say, there are lots of interesting thing you can also learn about the ordinary [00:30:45] person so one of the things about material culture, especially for this museum, is that's one of its larger missions was to document the ordinary lives of every-day people [00:30:55] in the American past. The first exhibition that I worked on when I came here as a young person was actually called that, "Life in America," and it— which [00:31:06] was about life in America at the time of the American Revolution. In looking at the things, the stuff of people's lives, the things [00:31:17] they cherish and the things they take for granted, the things they wear, the things they save, the things that [00:31:24] some unusual person saved that most people don't save, but were actually very common at that time. In looking at literally the stuff [00:31:35] of live, you learn many things that you cannot learn from just reading because everybody lives in and generates actual stuff, but only a few people actually [00:31:50] write books or paint paintings or do scientific experiments and those people are very interesting, too, and you want to save the stuff that records [00:32:03] that activity, too. Yes, we want to have Ben Franklin's telescope. Yes, we want to have that, [00:32:10] but we also want to see how that telescope or how that telegraph, early telegraph machine, what did it look like in its [00:32:21] context, and its context is the ordinary context of life at that time.

I also find that many people find it easier to imagine what the past was [00:32:34] like by having the stuff of life rather than just reading it in a book. Historians and people who are other scholars can get [00:32:44] a lot of information just by reading, but reading is only one kind of an activity. It's only one way to learn something and so all the other people who learn [00:32:52] better by seeing things or who learn better by hearing things because it's not just sort of the three-dimensional object, it's the whole stuff of a [00:33:04] cultural frame which are sights and sounds and images as well as the stuff that generates those things. That really is a more accurate [00:33:15] presentation of what the past was like, so the role— Your role as a curator is negotiating this very complex process because you can't save everything. [00:33:28] It's not physically possible to save

everything and so you're constantly making choices about what to save and what not to save and there're different schools of thought about how to go [00:33:40] about this.

Some people like to collect from collectors. Some people like to collect from ordinary people who just happen to have the thing that you're interested [00:33:54] in and these are not— You can do both, okay. They're not mutually exclusive kinds of activities, but the point is one is always [00:34:04] asking oneself what about this particular object or this group of objects is evocative enough that it is meaningful to the people who used it [00:34:16] and will also speak to people in the future who may or may not use that thing or may use something different that evolved out of this thing. Does [00:34:29] it communicate something meaningful about the lives of the people who made it and used it and cherished it? I used to collect ephemera. Ephemera are [00:34:37] things you throw away. There're a lot of things to be learned by things that people ordinarily throw away. Some people save them and then we go to their [00:34:45] house, but the point is, that you're constantly judging, making judgments about what is worthy enough to save.

For some people, the only worthy things [00:34:57] to save are things with— that are associated with essentially famous people and that is an important goal. That's why we have presidential libraries, for [00:35:11] example, or historic house museums of famous people, but that's [00:35:15] not the only— those are not the only kinds of people who matter. A lot of ordinary people matter, too, and there is as much to know about the dialogue [00:35:29] you could say, or the conversation of objects that range from the extraordinary object owned by these extraordinary person and the ordinary object owned by [00:35:41] the ordinary person, all of these things are taking place, let's just say for the sake of argument, at a particular historical moment and the key is to pick [00:35:53] important moments and to find objects that represent or embody or are evocative of that particular moment.

Q: Let me ask the peanut gallery back here if [00:36:09] we have additional questions that I missed. Anyone?

Ruffins: I'm glad he gave you a, he, Bill, gave you a lot about— I was very worried about that and then [00:36:26] he and I talked and I thought, oh yes, he's going to do all of that and then I won't have to—

Q: Is [00:36:31] there one thing that's specifically about the lunch counter. When you approach it and look at it, is there anything, like a detail that you [00:36:40] see that maybe others might not or is there something about it that strikes you in a way that's resonant for you?

Ruffins: The thing about [00:36:50] that it's resonant to me is it reminds me of my childhood. The thing that— Okay. When I go up to the lunch counter and of course [00:36:57] I know all these things about the lunch counter and what happened there, blah . . . , but the thing that I'm always struck with personally is that it looks [00:37:07] the way lunch counters looked basically when I was child, so it evokes childhood for me. I think, wow, [00:37:15] yeah, I mean, I went to places just like this and sat there with my

mother and my younger sister, so it evokes a familiar— literally, [00:37:31] the material culture of childhood and in that sense, it brings back for me that world. In that particular lunch counter I think it's up in Brown, you have a [00:37:41] a rack that tells you a little bit of what's for sale and there's some prices. All of that, the whole piece of that, you know, makes me think of the [00:37:53] early '60s when I was a young child. I was, how old? I was six years old when they sat in at this lunch counter.

Q: Do you think it might have a [00:38:00] similar impact in terms of capturing an era for, let's say, a 13-year-old who sees it today?

Ruffins: I think [00:38:13] that there is— I think that there is a, you know, lunch counters like that don't really exist much any more. Okay. Now, people go to Ikea, okay, or they go [00:38:31] to Starbucks or they go to Borders so it doesn't look like that, but people are still doing that activity which is going about your ordinary day shopping [00:38:42] and getting a little something to eat before you go home, so I think that it has the power to evoke a [00:38:50] feeling of familiarity. My throat is starting to hurt . . . To the lunch counter, that's really— I mean, even by the '80s—

Q: Well, I was born in '74—

Ruffins: You were [00:39:09] born in '74 and where?

Q: In Pittsburgh,

Ruffins: Okay.

Q: And they had a mall that had a Woolworths in it, next to it.

Ruffins: Oh, next to it? Not in [00:39:19] the mall?

Q: Well, in the mall—

Ruffins: It was the old strip—

Q: _____ the store.

Ruffins: Oh, really?

Q: So, it was an interior [00:39:24] mall and next to the store there was a little set of two booths and you could get a hamburger and a hot dog and slushy—

Ruffins: Oh, next to the [00:39:32] store.

Q: Yeah, so there one—

Ruffins: I see. It was a covered mall and then there's the Woolworths and then you could— So it had come out, [00:39:38] right—

Q: So it was not actually in the store, but there was a still a Woolworths where you could a hot dog.

Ruffins: Because there are Woolworths that [00:39:43] are in like those old strip malls. They would be old then, strip malls, that are almost gone now because they've been covered, but in [00:39:53] the south, they were often on streets as opposed to the mall-like where you'd drive in and there was a little parking lot in front.

Q: I only [00:40:02] have two more questions. I promise. I appreciate— I really appreciate this.

Ruffins: Oh, I hope this helps. I mean, not— I mean, you all, but I mean I [00:40:11] hope this helps like, you know, in general, that people can learn more about objects and think more about objects and understand more about how they fit into the larger [00:40:19] scheme of the past.

Q: Because for so many kids, it's like the textbook and that's it, so the one question I wanted [00:40:27] to ask is . . . if you think about the lunch counter, are there a set of particular historical features as to

Ruffins: One historical theme that— [00:40:53] The most obvious one obviously is the civil rights movement and what it changed and part of what it changed was ordinary life in America, so the civil rights movement has lofty, spiritual [00:41:13] and philosophical kinds of elements and it has legal ramifications, but it also changed a lot of ordinary, everyday life, so it's useful to think about [00:41:23] it as being a very multi-dimensional, a true social change, a transformation of the country. Very little that happens today is exactly like [00:41:36] it was in 1959, before this happened. There may still be problems in the United States but it's not like that anymore, so that's one sort of big set of changes. [00:41:49]

Another thing that I think about because I'm very interested in business history and consumption, the history of consumption, is how commercial culture has changed, how shopping [00:42:00] has changed, how eating and consuming in a commercial environment has really changed a lot. When I said that it evokes my childhood to [00:42:10] me, well, as I said, when I said Starbucks and I said Ikea, these places look very different and they fit into someone's life in a very different way [00:42:19] than walking down the street to go to the Woolworths.

Another thing that I think about is essentially architectural or changes in how the cityscape [00:42:32] looks, that the way that the pictures that you see of that Woolworths and how it fit into the cityscape of Greensboro at that time and you see many many [00:42:48] people walking, you see relatively few cars, you see lots of little stores that are along the street with them. You see very little neon [00:43:02] billboards, things like

this, so it really evokes the theme of how architectural, how the United States has changed visually and architecturally is also. [00:43:16] All of those things I think of when I see the Woolworth counter.

To a lesser degree but I still do think about this, I think about family life, [00:43:25] because although women and children would go to the cafeteria, but men would often go on their lunch break. If you look at the pictures of who was [00:43:40] eating at the Woolworth counter, you see very interesting things about ordinary life, of how work life, family life, how lunch fit into that life in a very different [00:43:50] than it does today. Today, lot's more fast food. Now, Woolworths was a kind of fast food. I mean, it wasn't— It didn't take hours to [00:44:00] cook this, but it wasn't— And it had a kind of brand like McDonald's or Burger King has a brand, but Woolworths wasn't just the food. It was this [00:44:12] larger commercial entity in which the food was just one element, so there're many different kinds of historical themes [00:44:19] that I think that you could— that the Woolworth counter evokes.

Those other themes may not be as important. If we were going to document [00:44:28] those other themes, we might not have wanted that particular Woolworth counter, but a Woolworth counter from different parts of the country might well have been [00:44:39] collected for any of those other reasons, but the reason we wanted that particular one has to do with the civil rights movement.

Q: If you were to [00:44:51] approach the lunch counter with a group of 16-, 17-year-old high students, what would be the most important— sort of the important thing that you'd want them [00:45:01] to take away from that counter?

Ruffins: That young people can make a difference. That is the— That young people can out of their own experience and they don't have [00:45:18] to plan it for a hundred years, that young people can use their enthusiasm, their beliefs, their bodies, their experiences, and do something that may well spark [00:45:32] a change far bigger than themselves.

Q: One last question and I think we may have covered this, but I can't remember actually. If I asked you sort of what questions [00:45:49] that the lunch counter itself raises—

Ruffins: Oh, what questions does it raise. What questions does it raise? What historical questions, what material culture questions, what questions does it raise? One of the interesting [00:46:17] questions that I think it raises is how we assign value to objects and this flows a little bit from what I just said before which is any Woolworth counter [00:46:28] might demonstrate some of the other things that I talked about—consumption, shopping, changes in family life, changes in the visual scape of cities, [00:46:38] but that particular Woolworth counter is valuable to us and is seen as an icon of the civil rights movement. Something that I don't exactly disagree [00:46:51] with— Obviously I've talked about this at great length, but because it doesn't say civil rights on it, okay, I mean, it's not like a protest sign that says the [00:47:03] march for jobs, peace, and

freedom which when you see that, you know that there's something there that people are resisting.

The Woolworth counter is a large [00:47:11] thing but it's more like the short-handled hoe. It's an object which is iconic because of what we know about it, but it is not in and of itself an iconic [00:47:24] object like the first telephone that Alexander Graham Bell is using, okay? So, the questions that it raises I think have a lot [00:47:38] to do with how does one convey the value that people see— How does one convey the iconic value, not the ordinary, but the iconic and symbolic value that [00:47:51] this Woolworth counter plays for people who are old enough to remember this experience. How could you convey that to people who weren't alive at the time and who look [00:48:02] upon it and say, wow, it's like a lunch counter and it's like, you know, a lunch counter is like a little hoe, what is that, what does it mean? I think that's one of the [00:48:14] real crucial sort of issues and one that, of course, we make big efforts to address by how we put it on exhibit and what we show around it, but this is— [00:48:23]

It reaches to— It points to questions about the continuing value of the past anyway, so the past is [00:48:43] always there, but at different moments different parts of the past are particularly meaningful to people in the present so another thing, another question that it raises [00:48:55] for me is over the course of decades what will be the up and down fortunes of this kind of an object. In 20 years, will people see it as the kind of [00:49:08] icon that we see it today or will be, oh, that's really sort of interesting, but something— or something else has intervened that's of greater iconic [00:49:16] value to those people, to the people who're living 20 years from now. Is there something happening now that's seen as bigger and more important and therefore lets [00:49:25] take that off exhibit and put something else on exhibit because, you know, exhibits and cultural production changes and the issue is to forge a relationship between something [00:49:39] in the past and people in the present and that relationship changes over time and so I'll be very interested to see how an object like this, what its history [00:49:53] of use in the museum will be over the course of the next 25 or 30 years when maybe I'm around to visualize that. It would be wonderful. It would [00:50:06] be very interesting to live long enough to see a longer trajectory.

We see in memorials, for example, that memorials are often very very important to [00:50:18] people who live through an experience or maybe their parents lived through that experience but when that generation passes completely into history, that memorial may or may [00:50:29] not continue to be important. At the same time, there're memorials today from the Civil War, the Revolutionary War that are as meaningful to people today as they [00:50:38] were fifty years ago or a hundred years ago, so it's very interesting to see how that connection between the past and people in the present, how [00:50:50] that evolves over time, so those are some of the kinds of questions that I think about its future as a museum object.

Q: Wonderful.

Ruffins: Well, [00:51:02] you all are very nice. Yes.

Q: Can I ask you something?

Ruffins: Yes.

Q: How about the comparative value. The Smithsonian also has the lunar lander and the Hope Diamond. [00:51:19] Is there equal values?

Ruffins: You mean, equal in terms of how people regard it, since we're not talking money, right?

Q: Cultural significance.

Ruffins: It's [00:51:33] hard to know. It's hard to put a value on different kinds of objects in terms of what they mean because— For many reasons, but something, for example, [00:51:50] like the Hope Diamond is— It's one of the biggest and rarest things of its type, okay, so isn't the Hope Diamond blue? [00:52:04] I'm really— Isn't it blue? I'm forgetting. So, it's— I haven't seen it in a long time. So, you know, it's a large blue diamond which isn't [00:52:12] very ordinary. It's an extraordinary thing whereas the lunch counter is an ordinary thing made extraordinary by what happened to it, so that's a different kind of a— There's [00:52:26] a different quality in what's valuable about it. Some people, not in the museum world, but some people out there in the public might think that something like the [00:52:35] Hope Diamond is always going to be more valuable because it has a more obvious kind of monetary value, let's just say, and this can often [00:52:51] become a problem when you're talking to people who might be interested in donating or who have an object [00:52:59] that you might be interested in getting because there's like "Antiques Road Show" and there're all these places where people get at the end of the program, [00:53:08] they get like a value on their thing and many things of historical value have almost no market value so value itself is a very slippery kind of concept.

What [00:53:21] I would say about that Woolworth counter is that it is valuable just like other things that are the elements [00:53:30] of extraordinary events, that that's a different kind of a value than something which may be the rarest of its type, that it's the ordinariness [00:53:41] in the middle of extraordinary events that makes that so valuable which is different than being the rarest most unusual example of something so there're [00:53:53] different kinds of value to think about. Does that sort of answer what you were thinking of?

Q: Great. Wow. We got like so much . . . [00:54:08]

Ruffins: You have to be quiet for two minutes. One of the most evocative things in any exhibition can be sound and sound that [00:54:29] goes all the way from recorded music to voices, ordinary conversation or extraordinary conversation, the music of this time, the music of 1960 was really changing. [00:54:46] It had begun to change before 1960, but the music that the college students who are listening— who are sitting in [00:54:53] and

their friends and others who joined them like the sorority girls who come down a couple days later and join them on the sit-in, that music [00:55:04] really is evocative of this period because for the first time you have really big cross-over audiences. You have people who are not black listening to lots [00:55:14] of African American singers. You have people who sound— The sound of young white singers and young black singers in the south but in other parts of the country [00:55:27] evolving this new music that some people called rock and roll, some people called rhythm and blues, some people later call it soul. There's a wave of musical [00:55:37] creativity that's going on at this time and when you see films about this time, often that music, the music of the [00:55:46] time is really used to set the mood, to set the place.

A great example in the civil rights movement specifically is the songs of the movement and some of those [00:56:00] songs derive from church music hymns and spirituals. Some of those songs derive from pop music and people would just change the words, Sometimes [00:56:08] spontaneously to pop songs or songs they heard on the radio that become sit-in songs, so the music of this time really shows the complexity [00:56:24] of what's going on in American culture and, in particular, shows a pathway not necessarily because people are planning this, but it shows— It leads to a pathway [00:56:36] in the direction of an integrated society because with radio and with broadcast music, lots of people could— You could listen to the radio in the middle [00:56:46] of the night and hear anything that you wanted to hear. You could take your little transistor, your little record player, [00:56:54] portable record player that you could play 45s on and go to the beach or go camping. You could hear the music that you wanted to [00:57:01] hear and that music was produced in many cases by young people, by the same kinds of young people who're in the sit-in movement and it's particularly [00:57:09] wonderful and evocative way to communicate the mood of that time.

That was a good question. See, that's why it's good to—

Q: You're involved [00:57:24] [end of recording]