

Jack Boyte Oral History Interview

Interview Conducted by
Jean Johnson
April 26, 1996

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Title: Jack Boyte oral history interview, 1996 April 26

Description: Native Charlottean Jack Boyte shares his experiences with evangelical revivals in Charlotte, North Carolina. From his days of Boy Scout volunteerism, he discusses his exposure to and participation in the revivals of evangelist Mordecai Ham. He offers vivid descriptions of the scene, including the physical setup of the tent revival, fundraising techniques, and the tenor of the meetings. Mr. Boyte describes choosing to attend revivals with friends more for entertainment than for religious experience, as he considered himself a mainstream Presbyterian, not an evangelical. He also discusses evangelist Billy Graham, who was close in age to Mr. Boyte and also grew up in Charlotte, including his memories of the prayer meeting in which Dr. Graham experienced a religious conversion as a teenager.

Biography: Jack Boyte was a 76-year-old man at the time of interview, which took place at his home in Charlotte, North Carolina. He was born in Charlotte in 1920. He graduated from Georgia Tech with a BS degree in Architecture and was employed as an architect.

Keywords: Boyte, Jack O., 1920-2005; Ham, M. F. (Mordecai Fowler), 1877-1961; Graham, Billy, 1918-2018; Revivals; Evangelicalism; Religious gatherings; City and town life; Boy Scouts; Presbyterianism; Church fund raising; North Carolina--Charlotte; North Carolina--Charlotte--Elizabeth; North Carolina--Charlotte--Plaza Hills; Interviews (Sound recordings); Oral histories

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Coverage: Charlotte, North Carolina circa 1930-2000

Interview History:

Interviewer: Jean Johnson

Transcriber: Joanne Shand

Editors: Melinda H. Desmarais

Setting Description: The home of Jack Boyte in Charlotte, North Carolina.

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(<https://findingaids.uncc.edu/repositories/4/resources/129>)

Transcript Notes: JJ : Jean Johnson
JB : Jack Boyte

Jack Boyte Oral History Interview Transcript

JJ: We're talking to Jack Boyte at his home. This is April 24, 1996.

JB: Okay.

JJ: Now, I'd mostly like to know about more Mordecai Ham and the revival.

JB: Okay, well--

JJ: Tell us, tell us what you were doing there.

JB: Well, (clears throat) I was a member of Troop 11, Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian Church. Very dedicated Boy Scout. Just loved it. And Reginald Price was our scoutmaster, and he motivated us to really do a good job. Well I went to the Ham-Ramsay revival to earn credit points, Boy Scout credit points, as a parking attendant. And I guess I started out there early on, either during the first days of the revival or soon after it started. And I went just about every night. Parked cars and then after all the people came and went inside, then we would go in and sit on the back row and kind of watch what was going on. And really paying just a very small amount of attention to what was happen--I liked the music, because I thought it was a lot of fun to listen to that. And Mr. Ramsey, who was the music director, was really very colorful. He was a kind of a rotund fellow, and he made a lot of--he moved around a lot, you know, and very active in the way he directed the choir, and I just enjoyed it. Well that was what I was doing there. I was a Boy Scout parking attendant, about fourteen or fifteen years old.

JJ: Did your parents go or any of your--?

JB: Yeah, I think they did. I don't know how often they went, but they--you know, people who lived in Elizabeth--as a matter of fact, they drew crowds from all over town. It was a well-attended revival. Mordecai Ham was a spectacular event in Charlotte at the, when he first came. As a matter of fact, he was always, always well thought of, I think, during all of his career. But his first revival in Charlotte was a real success. He got a lot, a lot of press. The papers gave him a lot of write-ups and, and he was very successful. He won a lot of people to Christ. And he had an interesting background and even as a lad, I remember the fact that he was apparently a highly successful businessman. That was the impression I got of him, you know. And he felt the calling to be a Christian evangelist, and he gave up his business and apparently sacrificed a large income, which in the thirties, you know, was--there weren't many people making large incomes in those days. I was really impressed with that; I thought that was quite a sacrifice. And he was a very articulate, fiery speaker, you know. A very winning personality.

JJ: I'm going to stop it.

Pause in Recording.

JJ: Tell me what the, what did the revival look like? I mean how big were the crowds and--?

JB: Well, you know, as a boy, I was, probably would exaggerate the number of people because a hundred people seemed like a lot to me. But it was a, it was a wooden structure with a wooden tent, really. It wasn't canvas; it was wooden, and it had a forest of columns. It was just columns every twenty feet or something like that, fifteen feet. And I would say, probably, several thousand people could be seated at one time. It had wooden benches and a sawdust floor. And the pulpit or the platform was raised three or four feet, and then behind that in step rows was the choir. And the choir was large. They, a lot of people sang in the choir and wanted to because they liked to sing. Also, it was a prominent place to be. The field at the corner of Central Avenue and Pecan was just a farm field. It was nothing there. There were no stores and then later there were a lot of stores built. The shopping center and the Central Avenue. Plaza Road Shopping Center was built. It was there, but it was in the early stage. It was before William Harris opened his supermarket. It was before that; I think he opened his supermarket in the forties or late thirties. So, it was a viable shopping area, suburban area shopping area. And right in the middle of apparently a very vigorous neighborhood area in Charlotte there, Plaza Hills, which was the Plaza and country club area. Midwood was not developed then. Midwood came along later. Elizabeth was close by, and Piedmont Hills, a few, a mile or two from there. And (pause) they drew big crowds. I remember the, I remember we ran out of spaces for the cars in that big old field regularly. And that's one of the reasons they had the Boy Scouts there to park cars, because we had to control where they parked and line them up and kind of keep things orderly as well as we could. I don't think we did a great job, but we tried.

JJ: Um-hum.

JB: But I, I remember the wooden building. I thought it was spectacular, and I remember little light bulbs hanging from the ceiling. You know, a string of bare bulbs hanging around, you know. And I remember the sawdust floor, which I just loved the smell of, because it reminded me of a circus. And, and I listened to Mordecai Ham a little bit, you know, but not enough to really go forward. I never went forward. (laughs) But I was a, I was a member of Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian Church, and I went to Sunday School every Sunday, so I thought I was in good shape, you know. Didn't need it. But that was the scene.

JJ: Um-hum.

JB: That was the scene.

JJ: Y'all were in good shape. Mordecai Ham was anti-Semitic and had put up signs at the time--

JB: I didn't know that.

JJ: Did you remember that?

JB: No.

JJ: At all?

JB: I do not remember that.

JJ: The Jewish community was quite upset with his presence.

JB: I did not know that--

JJ: Yeah.

JB: I did not know that. No, that's disappointing.

JJ: Well as a boy that might not, that might not have registered.

JB: I didn't know; it didn't register.

JJ: Yeah.

JB: Because I never thought about that.

JJ: And there was some discussions before he came from ministers in other towns that they didn't want him to come because of that.

JB: Really?

JJ: Because it might cause problems.

JB: Well that, that surprises me. That's the first I've heard of that.

JJ: Yeah.

JB: I, I--

JJ: Well for the day, you know, in 1934, it's-- (pause) I don't know--it's not acceptable, but it probably was more prevalent than it is now or--

JB: Yeah, well that's disappointing.

JJ: Yeah.

JB: I, I don't--he's not one of my heroes, but I didn't know that that was the case.

JJ: Have you ever been to a revival since or did you--?

JB: Oh yeah. I've been to many of them.

JJ: Have you been to--

JB: I went to Billy Graham.

JJ: Which did you go to?

JB: I mean Billy, Billy Sunday. He's had a revival in the Armory Auditorium--

JJ: Describe that for me.

JB: --when I was in high school.

JJ: What was that like?

JB: It was, it was, it was more formal, more organized, and more, more structured, you know. And he was a lot more impressive personality, because I think he was more involved in the, in the community, and he had a bigger reputation. He was nationally known. And I sang in the choir in that. I was in high school then. Yeah, I remember that.

JJ: Did your friends do it with you?

JB: Pardon?

JJ: Did your friends go along with you?

JB: Yeah.

JJ: And did they participate?

JB: Yeah, I had, I had a lot of, a lot of buddies that went. We sat together, and we sang and had a good time. And it was a colorful event, you know. And I mean it filled that Armory Auditorium every night. I just thought it was picturesque, you know, and I was, I just liked to be part of the crowd. And I enjoyed it. (laughs)

JJ: What other evangelists came or do you--? Besides ()--?

JB: Well, I remember--of course, later I went to Billy Graham's. He's been here once or twice before, and I went to the one he held in the Independence Arena, or whatever you call the Coliseum. I went to that one. And as a matter of fact, I was an usher. I signed up to help with that and, and Cliff, who was that? Cliff Roberts, Cliff--

JJ: Barrows. Barrows.

JB: --Barrows. I remember him giving us instructions and all that kind of thing. I remember doing that, and that's not--that's in fairly recent years, about twenty-five years ago.

JJ: Nineteen fifty-eight.

JB: And there were other minor evangelists. See, I, I really wasn't into evangelism too much. I'm, you know as I say I was a member of Caldwell Church, and I didn't feel the need for that. The preachers over there kept us too straight. (laughs) But, and I had some role models who I admired so much that I was pretty--I behaved myself pretty well, not all the time, but I had a Boy Scout leader named Rufus Page at Camp Steer who I thought was just a wonderful man. And, and he was a straight arrow, you know. My Boy Scout leader was Reginald Price, who was a straight arrow and just a wonderful guy. And those people--and my father. So, they all, you know, were role models, and I, I just didn't feel the need for it.

JJ: Why would you and, and your friends maybe, why did you go to crusades if you didn't feel the need for it?

JB: The excitement of the event, you know, and the crowds and just--there wasn't a whole lot to do (laughs) to be honest with you. In those days teenagers really didn't have that much to do. I didn't anyway. My main activities were Boy Scouts and, and (pause) I played a lot of tennis. I spent a lot of time on the tennis courts. And but that was just something different and special, you know. I didn't go to all of them all of the time, but I went pretty regularly with friends who lived in the neighborhood, you know. We thought it was kind of colorful and also thought there

was some kooks around here and they were acting kind of strange. And we got a kick out of that. You know how teenagers sit in the back row and snicker? We did that. (laughs) And so I would have, I have memories of those days, but they're not really strong memories. They're vague to some degree. I just remember doing that.

JJ: He was here in 1972. Did you go to the one, crusade?

JB: Billy Graham?

JJ: Um-hum.

JB: That's probably the one I'm talking about--

JJ: ()

JB: --because I was in, I had an architectural practice at time, a large one. I had a pretty good size office, and several people from my office went with me to that crusade at the, in the Coliseum--right? Yeah, I re--that's the one I was talking about.

JJ: So, you think you didn't go '58 or you--?

JB: I'm not--I don't think I did. I don't believe I did, not faithfully.

JJ: Uh-huh.

JB: See I--Martha and I just came back to Charlotte in '51, that's when I first started working here. And I was--I don't think I went to that '58 crusade. I don't remember doing that.

JJ: Are you planning to go to this one?

JB: Probably, probably will. I, I don't know. I'll just have to see. I'm not--I mean I admire Billy Graham, and I think he is really a great preacher and has done a wonderful job, but I'm not a dedicated follower as far as hanging on every word he says. And I'm not--I don't want to get into that. You know, I don't want to be critical of him. I think he's a remarkable fellow.

JJ: He's a hard person to be critical of.

JB: Well, he is, because how can you criticize somebody who is so obviously sincere, and so obviously believes that every word he is saying is the truth, you know? And I don't deny that because who am I to make a judgment? But I get--my religion consists of going--I'm a mainline

Presbyterian, and (laughs) I feel like that's, that's pretty good, you know. I mean if I can just hold to that I'm doing pretty good. But as far as, you know, this business of going to evan--evangelistic, or going to the crusades and going forward and making these professions, that's a bit--I'm beyond that a little bit, you know. I don't--I, I just feel like that if, if in this stage of my life if I haven't decided what my relationship with God is then, then, then I'm in bad shape myself, personally, so I don't, I don't--of course everybody needs to be kind of renewed and rejuvenated, but I can get that from John Rogers. (laughs) That's enough of that.

JJ: Yeah. Evangelism really took off in Kentucky and spread through the South very early. It's always been popular in the South.

JB: Um-hum.

JJ: Do you think there are--? Are you a native Southerner?

JB: I was born and reared in Charlotte.

JJ: Oh, were you?

JB: Yeah.

JJ: Okay.

JB: Right in that same area where the crusade occurred in Elizabeth. Yeah. That's where I grew up.

JJ: Right where Mordecai was?

JJ: Do you think that there are things about the Southern people that make them more drawn to evangelism than other parts of the country? Of course, it's becoming popular all over the country now.

JB: I don't really think so. I think Southerners have, have traditions and certain standards of things that they, they like to hang on to from the past. But I think that's true all over the country. I don't think we're different from any other people in that respect. The traditions are different, and Southerners have a tradition of being kind of laid back and, and slow and easy, you know, which I love. But I think there are other people like that too. When I was in the service during World War II, I met a lot of people from other areas: New York, California, and Midwest. And they were so similar that it was re--I was impressed by the fact that we all felt pretty much the same about things, you know. That I was--I found out then that people aren't that different.

JJ: Um-hum. We, in the office, we have a hard time just discussing the word evangelism. I think it's sort of a confusing term.

JB: Yeah.

JJ: And to me in some ways, Protestants are all evangelical if you say it means spreading the word of Jesus and (telling about it)--

JB: It's what the *Bible* teaches us to do.

JJ: Right, so isn't, isn't, isn't that evangelism? But then you have sort of a more right-wing evangelists, which gets more toward revivals and things.

JB: That's right. You know, I'm not a, I'm not a biblical scholar and I'm, I'm certainly not qualified to make too much comment about religion. I have a strong religious faith, as you do and people who belong to the church do because you, you swear that you do when you join the church and I'm--and we're sincere when we do that, and that's enough. I mean I don't--I think evangelistic or crusades serve a purpose of bringing people into the Christian faith who, who are out of it and, and need to be, it needs to be explained to them. And the, and the (pause) joy and happiness of being a Christian comes to them as kind of a new thing. You know, that's--I don't really know how to explain it, but [Long pause] crusades, evangelistic crusades had no--even when I was a boy, they appealed to me because I thought they were interesting, not because I was going to change the way I looked at my relationship with God and Christ. You know, I'm--it's been pretty much the same. I guess, in a way, I've denied the fact that the *Bible* says that you need to, you need to be, what--to repent and be saved and be born again. I've never been through that experience. Because I was raised by Christian parents, you know, Presbyterian and Methodist. My father was a Methodist and went to the Presbyterian Church because my mother made him. (laughs) So, you know, I was raised that way, and I, I've always wondered. I've often wondered--I'm not talking about Billy Graham. This is, this is--why am I talking about this?

JJ: (laughs)

JB: I've often wondered if I'd been born in some other faith, Islam or Buddhism, how would I feel about Christianity. You know? I don't, I don't reject those other religions at all. I think there're other--I think there's more than one way to reach God, to, to, to have access to God. I think that there are a lot of religions--

JJ: Um-hum.

JB: --that have the viability and integrity and of truth. The truth is found in a lot of different places besides in our church. You know, that, that be heretical, but (laughs) that's just the way I feel about in my case and in the case of the members of Covenant Church. Our route to, (doorbell rings) to salvation is through the Presbyterian Church.

Pause in Recording.

JB: --corner is what it was.

JJ: (laughs) That's fine. The one thing I was thinking of while we were talking to Clarence when she had said on the phone, you thought you might have been at the Mordecai revival the night Billy Graham was there.

JB: I might have been. Yeah, I might have been. I remember being there one night when, when a group of high school students came out there to confront him with his, his statement during one or more sermons that the high school students were involved in dens of iniquity near the campuses, you know. I think--it's my impression that Billy Graham and Grady Wilson and a bunch of kids from Sharon came out there and talked to him about that and confronted him. And before it was over, they were falling in each other's arms and crying and saying they didn't mean to hurt each other, you know, and all of that. And so, I think Billy Graham either came back later or that night professed his acceptance of Christ, and one thing led to another. I think that's--see, I don't know for sure. Because I was so young, I just didn't--the details didn't impress themselves on me. But I do remember that.

JJ: What school did you go to?

JB: Central High.

JJ: Central High.

JB: Um-hum.

JJ: And now Billy Graham went to Sharon and --?

JB: Um-hum.

JJ: --was--did that go through high school?

JB: I think so. He didn't go Central, I don't believe.

JJ: Well some books say he graduated from Sharon--

JB: He went in the country; he went to a country school.

JJ: --and some say he graduated from Central.

JB: Really?

JJ: And so, we got the 1936 Central yearbook out, and he wasn't in there. And they talk about twenty-six people in his graduating class, and that's a much bigger class than that.

JB: Well Central High School's classes were hundreds, six, seven hundred. Because see, it was the only, it was the only school. It was the only white high school in town when I went there.

JJ: I think he must have graduated from Sharon.

JB: Well, there was Tech High in Belmont, which was, went, only went through eleven grades. But he was--he lived in the country, and I don't believe he came to Central High. I just don't know. He, he and I were kind of contemporaries. He, he's about my age, I believe.

JJ: Did you know him outside of--?

JJ: Unh-uh. No, I didn't. And I think that if they'd gone to Central, I would have known him, because even though there were hundreds of students there, most of them I knew either well or, you know, to speak to them. And I would have remembered him, I think. But I believe the--I don't know whether there was a high school in Sharon or not.

JJ: Well Anne Batten taught there, so I'm going to call her and ask her.

JB: Anne Ba--she, she taught him?

JJ: Well, we--she was there in 1940. We found some lea--

JB: Where?

JJ: At Sharon.

JB: She was?

JJ: We found some old records in the library that listed the teachers and their home addresses--

JB: Uh-huh. Right.

JJ: --and the school where they taught. And she was there in the 1940s, so I thought maybe I'll give her a call.

JB: Well he would have been, if he's younger than I, he would have been in high school in '40. I graduated from Central High in 1938.

JJ: But he graduated in '36.

JB: Then he's two years--he's older.

JJ: That's right.

JB: Not many people older than me. (laughs)

JJ: (laughs) You were fourteen when you were doing the scout thing.

JB: Yeah, about--

JJ: And he was sixteen when he was doing it.

JB: --about that. Yeah, he would have been in high school.

JJ: So, he would have been two years--

JB: That's about right. But I, I do remember that night because--the reason that I remember it is, I think I told you that his driver and I got to be good friends. His driver was the chauffeur and kind of a businessman, that kind of guy.

JJ: Now who, who's the driver?

JB: Mordecai Ham's driver. He, he took, picked him up at the Charlotte Hotel and brought him out to the, to the site every night. It drove, he drove him out there and drove him back. And he lived pretty well, you know. I mean he was--Ramsey was a good fundraiser, so they had money coming in pretty, pretty regular. I told you a little bit about that.

JJ: Yeah, tell me about it again. I got the--

JB: But this fellow, and I can't remember his name. I, I, it's, it just keeps escaping me, but he was a young guy in his twenties who was a real nice fellow and very friendly and cordial, and he got to be friends with the Boy Scouts. And we spent a lot of time yakking at you, at each other. But he, he started coming by my house with, with, with Mordecai Ham in the back seat and picking me up and carrying me out there to the, to the tent, believe it or not. I sat in the front seat with him. Ramsey and Ham were in the back seat, and this fellow was in the front seat driving, and I'd hop in the front seat and ride out there with them. Can you believe that? But, anyway, that was--it was just very exciting to me. I love that. My parents were very impressed. (laughs)

JJ: You got some points there.

JB: That this big preacher would come by and pick me up. That didn't happen very much. You know, a few weeks at the most. But anyway, at the end of this one, one night at the end of the service--I usually went after the service came to an end, you know, and this guy was, he was a piano player also, so he was up on the platform. And at the end of the program, he was playing the final tune on the piano. And I used to walk up there and hang around at the foot of the platform waiting for him to finish. When he did, I'd run up there and tease him or bang him on the head, punch him, or do something, you know, silly. And the night of that encounter, I went up there to do it and he said, "No, no, no, no." He put me off, you know because it was so, so involved emotionally. He said, "Don't, don't come up here". But that impressed me because I thought, well what have I done wrong, you know. But, you know, anyway, I never will forget that. And so, Billy Graham was there talking to Mordecai Ham at the end of the service.

JJ: You told me on the phone about how they raised money; can you tell me about that?

JB: Ramsey.

JJ: Was he the one that did it?

JB: Ramsey was the choir director and the fundraiser. And during these services, at regular intervals, either at one time or more than one time during the services, I think they'd sing and then they'd raise money and then they'd sing again and then raise some more money. But he had the people in the audience make different signals about how much money they were going to give, including raising their hands if they're going to give a dollar and raising a couple of hands if they're going to give five dollars. And if they were going to give more than that, they'd wave their handkerchief. He really did that. And the ushers would come around with these buckets and pass them, and they'd put their money in the buckets. And they raised a lot of money that way. He was a real good fundraiser. He was very, very persuasive, you know, colorful character and very loud, and exciting. So, the people would really get caught up in it, and they'd put a lot of money in the pot. You know, ten cents to me was a lot of money so maybe it was, that's what it

was, but I (laughs) remember the dollars flowing pretty good. And Mordecai Ham lived in the Charlotte Hotel, which wasn't, was probably of the most expensive hotel in town. And I think the whole team lived down there. Had a, had a chauffeur and car and all the good things you know. And he did pretty well.

JJ: That's a good story. (laughs) Anything else you can think of?

JB: Well, not really. Yeah, there was one other--probably, probably if you've done any reading in the newspapers at that time, he had a real fuss with local merchants. Particular one guy who had a hot dog stand or a beer joint or something right across the street from the revival meeting house, and the fellow didn't like the fact that all these people were crowding around there and cutting into his business. And he criticized Ham's revival, and the paper quoted him or something. Anyway, Mordecai Ham resented that and started talking about it during his sermons and, and the guy, they had a real row, the two of them. And so, one night his place caught on fire and burned down, as I remember. And which I thought was really spectacular, you know. This guy's opposing Mordecai Ham, so God burned his place down, (laughs) which of course is ridiculous, but at the time, I thought that's probably what happened. Isn't that funny? I was an impressionable young guy.

JJ: Yes. Well you do wonder what happened.

JB: Yeah, that was funny, isn't it? I--a lot of things you can think of why that happened, and one was that one of Mordecai Ham's followers had something to do with that. And Ham, I don't think, Ham had anything to do with it. But he said that the man was making a mistake in opposing God's work. I remember that. It was in the newspapers, I believe.

JJ: Have you ever gone back and looked at those 1934--?

JB: No.

JJ: Well I'm getting ready to go back.

JB: The newspapers?

JJ: Yeah, I'm getting ready to go back and read this about--

JB: Well, see if you can find that story.

JJ: I will look for it.

JB: I--because, you know, over the years stories grow and become exaggerated. I could be all wrong about that. But I do remember the tent, and it was--and I'm practically sure it was a wooden tent with a tin roof. But there again, it could have been just a big wooden frame with a canvas roof. But I remember specifically the columns, how many columns. There was just columns all over the place. And at, and at fourteen years old, it seemed huge, but it could have been relatively small, you know. (laughs)

JJ: That's great. Okay.

JB: Okay.

JJ: Well thank you.

End of Interview.