

SPEAK NOW: MEMORIES OF THE CIVIL RIGHTS ERA

<http://da.mdah.ms.gov/series/conversations/speaknow>

On May 22–26, 2011, seventy-five men and women returned to Jackson, Mississippi, to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the 1961 Freedom Rides. In conjunction with an exhibit to commemorate the rides, the Mississippi Department of Archives and History offered the Freedom Riders and the public an opportunity to “Speak Now” and record memories of the Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi. Twenty-eight individuals responded, resulting in twenty-six audio recordings and corresponding transcripts and fifty-six digital color photographs. One interview in the collection was restricted by request of participants. The recordings are not traditional oral histories but are instead recordings of individuals recounting their own experiences during an era of cultural, political, and social change. Topics other than the Freedom Rides include African American veterans, Mississippi Freedom Schools, Medgar and Charles Evers, and the Mississippi State Penitentiary.

Note: This activity can be done as a full class discussion or as individual student work. A fillable PDF student version is provided at <https://www.mdah.ms.gov/learning-lagniappes>.

Subjects that can be addressed within this digital archive:

- Segregation and discrimination
- The Freedom Riders—Washington to New Orleans
- Voting rights and voter registration
- Public transportation
- The Civil Rights Movement
- Life as a civil rights activist
- The Citizen’s Council
- Hate crimes
- Emmett Till
- The KKK

Curricular Connections

Below are key standards featured in this Learning Lagniappe.

Mississippi Studies

- MS.8.1: Analyze the significant figures, groups, events, and strategies of the Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi.
- MS.8.3: Evaluate the lasting impact of the Civil Rights Movement on Mississippi.

U.S. History: 1877 to Present

- US.3.2: Trace the development of political, social, and cultural movements and subsequent reforms, including: Jim Crow laws, Plessy vs. Ferguson, women’s suffrage, temperance movement, Niagara movement, public education, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and Marcus Garvey.
- US.11.3: Explain contributions of individuals and groups to the modern Civil Rights Movement, including: Martin Luther King, Jr., James Meredith, Medgar Evers, Thurgood Marshall, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and the civil rights foot soldiers.

Directions: Use items from the MDAH Digital Archive entitled Speak Now: Memories of the Civil Rights Era found at <http://da.mdah.ms.gov/series/conversations/speaknow> to lead your class in analyzing and interpreting the following items. For more information about youth involvement in the Civil Rights Movement, explore <https://mississippiencyclopedia.org/entries/freedom-riders/> and <https://mshistorynow.mdah.ms.gov/issue/the-mississippi-civil-rights-movement-1955-1970-when-youth-protest>.

Note: Navigate to items by going to <http://da.mdah.ms.gov/series/conversations/speaknow>, selecting List Interviews, and then selecting the designated interview. The interview can be accessed through the audio file or written transcript.

Questions:

1. Select AU976 - Thomas Armstrong.

- a. Who was the civil rights activist who spoke in Jackson when Armstrong was a student at Tougaloo College? What impact did that event have on Armstrong’s involvement in the movement?

Answer: Medgar Evers spoke and inspired Armstrong to volunteer with voter registration efforts in Jackson which eventually led him to become a Freedom Rider. He was later named in lawsuits with NAACP leaders as a result of his being jailed during the Freedom Rides.

- b. What was an incident that opened Armstrong’s eyes into racial injustices as a teenager? What was the breaking point that led him to fully devote himself to activism?

Answer: Armstrong mentions an incident in his hometown of Prentiss, Mississippi, when he was thirteen where he was forced to go around to the back of a restaurant for service. Later, he felt he “hit a breaking point” when Governor Ross Barnett said that “blacks in Mississippi were satisfied with their condition there” and he felt compelled to take action to discredit this theory.

- c. Why did Armstrong believe it was important for locals to become involved with the Freedom Riders? What did Armstrong think was the impact of the Freedom Riders in Mississippi?

Answer: He believed that locals should be involved so that people could not pass the Freedom Riders off as outside agitators. Armstrong credits the Freedom Rides with inspiring civil rights leaders to challenge segregation policies in education and politics leading to desegregation of the state’s public colleges and universities and an increase in African American elected officials across the state. He also credits the rides with changing social customs that had been in place since the Jim Crow era.

2. Select AU978 - Max Pavesic.

- a. Max Pavesic was a student at UCLA when he was jailed for thirty days for participating in a Freedom Ride from New Orleans, Louisiana, to Jackson, Mississippi. When he and other Freedom Riders were released, they were transported back to Jackson by guards on a truck. Describe what happened during the ride back. What did the driver tell them?

Answer: They sang freedom songs. The driver told them they needed to stop acting up, or he would pull the truck off into a certain area and they would be “taken care of.”

- b. What retribution did Pavesic and other students at UCLA face when word got out about their involvement in the Civil Rights Movement?

Answer: One student was warned about a racist professor to avoid; another student was yelled at about going on the Freedom Ride; Pavesic received a cold shoulder from the secretary of the Department of Anthropology.

- c. Upon reflection on his trip, what did Pavesic realize about his knowledge of Mississippi? Be sure to look at the last paragraph when formulating your answer.

Answer: Pavesic realized that he had gone into Mississippi very naïve about the danger they would face. He also realized that he was unaware how many organizations were keeping tabs on citizens throughout the state.

3. Select AU999 - Flonzie Brown Wright.

- a. What event inspired Wright to become active in the movement? What were her first roles in the movement?

Answer: Wright became involved in the movement after the assassination of Medgar Evers. She first joined the movement during the integration efforts at Biloxi Beach where she became known for her singing and her willingness to speak out about the movement. When she returned to her hometown of Canton, Mississippi, she participated in voter registration efforts.

- b. When Wright was a young adult, she attempted to register to vote in Madison County, but was denied. What did this inspire her to do? What was significant about her accomplishment?

Answer: Wright was inspired to run for the registrar position. She ended up being elected as an Election Commissioner in 1968 with the responsibility to supervise the registrar position that had previously denied her voter registration. This was especially significant since there were no African Americans in elected office in the entire county, despite African Americans comprising more than 70 percent of Madison County's population. She became the first African American woman in the state to be elected to a public office since Reconstruction.

- c. What were some of the tactics used to deter African Americans from attempting to register to vote?

Answer: When African Americans attempted to register to vote, many were subjected to comprehension tests that were scored at the discretion of the clerk. Frequently, they were told they did not pass this test. Also, when African Americans would attempt to register to vote, their names would be published in the local paper. Then they would be subjected to harassment and could lose their jobs if their bosses were opposed to them registering.

- d. Why does Wright say the position of Election Commissioner is so important? What did she do in her administration to help Canton's citizens?

Answer: The Election Commissioner is important because the job has control over who can register and vote. Wright expresses that if the general public is going to be able to change anything, they need to be able to both register and vote. When Wright was in office, she made life better for Canton citizens by having jurors come from registered voters, instead of being personally selected by the registrar. She also trained poll workers and taught local people how to run elections.