

SPEAK NOW: MEMORIES OF THE CIVIL RIGHTS ERA
RECORDING SESSIONS

Max Pavesic

Moderated by LeAnna Welch

Thursday, May 26, 2011

William Winter Archives and History Building

Jackson, Mississippi

MISSISSIPPI DEPARTMENT OF ARCHIVES AND HISTORY
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Participant: Pavesic, Max

Title: *Speak Now: Memories of the Civil Rights Era* / Memories of Max Pavesic, Thursday, May 26, 2011/ moderated by LeAnna Welch

Scope Note: The Mississippi Department of Archives and History in conjunction with the 50th Anniversary of the Freedom Rides and to complement the Department's exhibit "*Freedom Rides: Journey for Change*" conducted recording sessions with local citizens to gather oral memories of the Civil Rights Era. The participants were also given the opportunity to have their photograph taken in front of the exhibit. The recordings were conducted in the spring and summer of 2011 at the William F. Winter Archives and History Building in Jackson, Mississippi.

WELCH: Ok Speak Now recording number 005. This is LeAnna Welch, with the Mississippi Department of Archives and History. Today's date is Thursday, May 26, 2011. Now sharing his Civil Rights Era memories is Mr. Max Pavic.

PAVESIC: Pavesic.

WELCH: Pavesic.

PAVESIC: Thank you. I was a student at UCLA and was recruited during a summer class—Spanish summer class—by a fellow who was a graduate student in anthropology and I was an undergraduate student in anthropology, and so after summer school, I didn't have a job lined up so it was something I thought was a great opportunity, it's something I always believed in, ever since I was a child I always believed—I could never understand discriminating people—for any reason against—whether it's people of color, whether it's people of ethnicity or what, it was something that I always had a, a problem with.

I come from a politically active family though, a left-wing family and so I was...kind of introduced to being on the line throughout the years, but this is something I did on my own. My family was terrified about my safety when I was coming, but this is something that was certainly done on my own. And I came with a group from UCLA, there were I think—believe there were 15 of us—most of us were students at UCLA, and we came in by train, on the Illinois Central, which is rather ironic because I—my—early childhood I grew up in Illinois and no matter where we lived I could hear the train “The City of New Orleans,” and it was always a childhood dream to take it from Chicago to New Orleans. Never in my wild life did I know that I was going to be put on the train in New Orleans, be arrested in Jackson and when we got out of jail, we had to leave town as fast as—CORE wanted us—to leave town as fast as we could, for our own safety, they put me back on “The City of New Orleans” to Chicago, so I made the trip eventually, but reverse from what I originally wanted to do.

We were here a couple of days in the city jail and then we were taken to Parchman Farm. We were put in the first offenders camp for about a week, and then we were put in maximum security and we were there for the majority of the time that we were in Parchl—Parchman—and so I don't remember how many exact days we were in but it—a—total of, I think, close to 30 days. One of the things that I really remember is: on the way back from Parchman, we were in a, a truck with a kind of camper on the back—it was a kind of a converted wagon or paddy wagon kind of thing—that they would transfer students—students, well, most of us were students—but prisoners back between the city jail and Parchman. And on

the way back, we started singing freedom songs and we got really worked up and because we were out of jail and really singing top of our lungs. And the driver of the truck was—all of a sudden—became very agitated and kept on yelling for us to shut up. So finally after several miles of this, he pulled over and he came back into the back of the truck and where he could see in and the man was physically shaken. He said, “You’re gonna get us all killed.” And we all kinda looked at him, and he says, “I’ve been told where to pull this truck off the highway into the woods and leave you there and abandon you,” for whoever was waiting for us. He said there were two places that, that we were to be left and that we would be quote “taken care of.” So we don’t know whether that meant we were gonna be beaten or whether our lives were gonna be taken, but we did shut up...when we came back in. And then when I came back from an arraignment in town, I had the distinct pleasure of meeting Medgar Evers in his driveway and that was in September of 1961 and he said at that time, he said “Let us—Let’s—go in the house. It is not safe out here. People are watching us,” and we went into his office. And that was where he was killed, you know several months later in '63 so. What else?

WELCH: So you were—you were—a student; you weren't working then?

PAVESIC: No, I was a student—full-time student—I had, I worked in various places and, you know while I was in school. In those days, it was cheap enough, we worked like in the winter at the post office for two weeks, and that was enough money to pay tuition and things like that at UCLA. We never paid—I never paid—more than a hundred dollars in tuition at UCLA.

WELCH: And you were single at the time?

PAVESIC: I was single at the time.

WELCH: So it was your parents that were fearful?

PAVESIC: Yes. And, it was, it was odd; I had a sister-in-law who was very much opposed to what I was doing and I didn't realize at the time and we had some tough arguments after that, but I was interviewed on a local T.V. channel—on the local news, you know, the evening news—and the power of the tube, I converted her by watch—by her watching—the show and make—my making—a statement then she realized what I was doing, but we were, we were quite active after that, we—a number of us—spoke at different colleges and universities around Los Angeles. We had a sit-in at the college—chancellor's office—at the university to get official recognition from the university, and all of us that were students—well I don't know all of us—but we were talking about it this week, there was a fellow—Bob Singleton—who organized our group, he was a student in economics and he went into the department one day, and there was a German professor from

Germany that he had met when he'd studied abroad and the professor brought him into the office and said, "These are the courses you should take, these are the professors that you should avoid. They are very racist and they are very much against you...doing this." And this was at UCLA, we thought it was a liberal place. Another friend of mine—Winston Fuller—was a graduate student in English. He was in the departmental reading room in the English Department, and his graduate adviser came in and chewed him out for going on a Freedom Ride and said he had no business doing that. I was in the Department of Anthropology and the secretary was from Georgia, I believe, and she was absolutely furious at me and, and made the chairman and other people in the department—also, I realized there was a cold shoulder then because I participated—and I had, had signed up to go on an archaeological survey, because I'm an archaeologist, in New Mexico after that, and instead I went on the Freedom Ride and, and I didn't realize, in fact, another fellow here, Bob Ferrell, had an old letter—somebody gave him a package of letters that he had sent to another Rider—and in that letter he talked about the harassment I had in the department and it was—it's odd—so here three different departments at a progressive school, you know that—in the West—that we still—and that's the kind of...that's how the whole country was, I mean the whole country didn't believe in the segregated South. But that the whole country, like many of the people in the South don't upset the apple cart and, people were, you know, NAACP was against us, Southern Leadership Council was against us when CORE started this direct action, and, the black middle class in Jackson was—didn't want us to shake up things—and things like this. But I didn't realize how...how...how strong a force that was in this country and, and still in the 1960s I was a young kid and I was—well, I wasn't that young, 21—but involved in a lot of things, and I just assumed everybody was aware and involved in a lot of things.

And I didn't realize what a closed state Mississippi was, with the Citizens Council, the Sovereignty Commission, and the Ku Klux Klan below it and they kept track of everybody in the state. The Commission then, had informants statewide, and no one was allowed to get outta line, basically it was a fascist state as far as I'm concerned and so it was very very...and I didn't realize what I was coming into and, and while I wasn't threatened for my life, I was anticipated, you know, we didn't know what to anticipate so we were concerned, but we had really no idea that our lives were at stake when we came in, we were that naive, I think, most of us.

WELCH: Thank you.

PAVESIC: Ok.

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