

SPEAK NOW: MEMORIES OF THE CIVIL RIGHTS ERA
RECORDING SESSIONS

John Hardy
and
Barrett Hatches

Moderated by LeAnna Welch

Saturday, May 28, 2011

William Winter Archives and History Building

Jackson, Mississippi

MISSISSIPPI DEPARTMENT OF ARCHIVES AND HISTORY
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Title: *Speak Now: Memories of the Civil Rights Era* / Memories of John Hardy and Barrett Hatches, Saturday, May 28, 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 now Speak Now recording 010. This is LeAnna Welch a volunteer with the Mississippi Department of Archives and History. Today's date is Saturday, May 28, 2011. Now sharing their Civil Rights Era memories is Mr. Barrett Hatches and Mr. John Hardy and they're gonna to talk together. Welcome, gentlemen.

HATCHES &
HARDY: Thank you.

WELCH: So what would y'all like to share?

HATCHES: I think I want to go back to the first memory I have of the Civil Rights Movement and the struggle, and when I was about 10 years old. I grew up on Lamar Street—North Lamar Street—1309, and I remember seeing the Freedom Riders, the people in the Movement, coming down the street in big ole trash trucks that they had turned into paddy wagons with bars all around them and they were putting them in those trash trucks 'cause they didn't have paddy wagons large enough, and and taking them down to the fairgrounds to house them for jails. And listening to them coming through singing when the red lights stopped at Fortification and Lamar Street, listening to them sing, and at 10 years old, understanding why—what—they were struggling for. I didn't understand the why around all of it, but I understood what they were struggling for, and what struck me was that they didn't seem mad; they were joyous, they were happy about having the opportunity to stand up for the struggle, and that the feeling that I remember the most, is standing there by myself quietly saying how bad I felt 'cause I wasn't old enough to be in there and participate. I wanted to be involved and, and so I look back at my life now some, almost 50 years later—40 years later—I look back at my life and the things that I've done, and I go back to that situation and what I felt there and how all of my life I've tried to, to do something to make a difference in my community across the board. And it's been because of what I saw then and what I felt then.

HARDY: Of course I, this is John Hardy, I reflect back to spending a lot of time with my uncle who lived on 702 Blume Street near Smith-Robertson School, and now Smith-Robertson Museum and recall one Sunday him taking me by the hand and—I must have been eight or nine years old—and taking me on Farish Street and as I recall in those days African Americans couldn't even walk on Capitol Street and we walked down to some type of gathering on Farish Street and the police showed up with German Shepherd dogs and all and of course I was a big animal lover and I was trying—I remember trying—to pet the dog and he was pulling me back and the dog was barking and growling, and everything else, couldn't understand why the dogs were so mean because most of the dogs I had been around had been very, very nice. And shortly thereafter, the fire department showed up and they sprayed the water on all these African Americans that were standing around. Of

course I didn't really understand what was going on; I was enjoying it. It was so hot that day and I never thought about the force of the water hitting us or anything like that. It was just—I thought it was—refreshing. But as I reflect on it now, my uncle took me down there for a reason. He wanted me to see how our people were being treated and the different injustices and all of that. He wanted me to experience it first hand, and it left an indelible mark with me and on me that I will never forget, so I can truly relate to what the Freedom Riders must have gone through during those times.

HATCHES:

And, and we talked earlier today—it's amazing—John and I grew up together. We're a year apart. He looks older, but I'm actually older by a year. And you know, you take this, this Civil Rights Movement, the Freedom Rider story, further down the line, we ended up at Central High School right downtown here. I came in the third class of integration, I believe, and John was in the fourth class. And, and I, you know even being in a, in a predominately white school in the very early seventies, when things were still hot racially, I became president of Central High School student body—the first black president of Central High School—and, and for that to happen in the early seventies in a school that still was predominately white, still I can't explain that to people. But it was, it was part of the Movement. And then the very next year—I graduated—the very next year John became the second black president of the school. Now here are two boys who grew up together, not even a block from each other, same struggles, who, who learned about the struggle and had impacts—the struggle had impacts—on their lives, differently, moved together to be a part of history like that and so for our period of time, that history was just as strong, but that history was, was...possible as a result of what happened in the early fifties and sixties. And so we have always felt a deep responsibility to, to people after us to do the same thing—provide the same opportunities—everywhere we could and do it in a little different way, you know inside versus outside the system and in the sixties and fifties, you know we could only fight from outside.

HARDY:

And to piggyback on that, when Barrett became the first African American student body president, one of the reasons he, he ran for the position and wanted to get it, they had a policy at the school where all of the student body presidents' pictures were placed in the library. So you walk in this library, and you just see all these white males up on the wall and Barrett had the mindset that “one day I'm gonna have my picture up there and it's gonna help and inspire other black students when they come to this school, look up there, see that black picture and say 'I'll run for student body president.’” And lo and behold Barrett wins the election, and they take down all of the pictures in the library.

HATCHES:

Yep, so my picture never hung.

HARDY: Never hung.

HATCHES: I have that picture, and I don't know how many years I've been out of high school now but, I have that picture hanging in my office at, at home, and, and my office at home is in a place where, even when I have events at my house people don't—there's no reason to go there—and I don't take everybody up there, but when I do, they always gravitate to that picture because I had the big afro and look so much different. And I stand there and I tell them that story. And then they walk out with a little different—little bit—of an attitude about what they thought they saw. But that, too, is part of what you share and, and nobody is bitter, I, I don't even think I was bitter about it then. I always try to understand—I try to understand—why and what we can do about it, but you know, that's—that—was my, my...my ticket, so, so to speak, to say, "You know you can't sit and do nothing. You gotta do something about these things."

HARDY: And it's important to maintain a positive posture in life and try to mentor as many people as possible, and that's part of the struggle too, you know Barrett mentored me, and I became the second African-American student body president. He has mentored me all along. I was without a job one time, and I moved in with he and his wife in Houston, Texas, and, and he was able to help me get on my feet and I once I got on my feet and got into a better job, over the years—I've been with my company now 36 years—and I have mentored a lot of African-Americans, in particular to try to help them get a leg up and that part of it is important and the Freedom Riders inspired us and they mentored us directly and indirectly.

HATCHES: Uh huh.

HARDY: There was not a lot of bitterness and all of that. Barrett and I were talking about, surely after the first bus came and you saw what happened. Those that came after them already knew what was going to happen.

HATCHES: But they came anyway.

HARDY: It was for the greater good. It was for the greater good.

HATCHES: John tells the story about, about growing up here and working here. One of the most—if not the most—exclusive private clubs in the city of Jackson has always been the University Club on top of the highest building in town, we always said. John started working over there as a kid as a busboy—dishwasher—and worked every job and has now been the general manager of that club for the last, what John?

HARDY: 23 years.

HATCHES: 23 years. That couldn't have happened, had those—had the—the people not come from all over this country on those buses down here to change things, that couldn't have happened. I'd gone on and moved away from Jackson after graduating from Jackson State undergrad and, and gone on to become President and CEO of four different utility companies in this country. No other black person can say they've done that, but I've done that as a result of what I learned here in Jackson, the platform that I was given. So we have taken what we learned back in the early sixties and made it work, not just for us, but everybody else that we could touch, and so, to find ourselves here today physically in this place is probably no accident either.

HARDY: Yeah.

HATCHES: You know, I've been gone, as I say, 33 years or so but I come home all the time and John and I said, John said, "Let's go down to, to the museum and see can see anything." So it's no fluke that we're here. I'm sure what we have to say, somebody's gonna hear and find some inspiration in, and so you know we just probably all our lives will feel that we have a responsibility. And it's so natural, it's just so natural, to help and give and I'm real happy about what the Movement did for me in my life.

And I'll tell you this final story. My father was really, really involved in the Civil Rights, and, and I didn't grow up with him, didn't really know him other than from a distance, but I remember, he died about five years ago and I went to his funeral and it was there that I realized, the impact that he had made on so many people's lives. He was in the Republic of New Africa, that whole Movement and, and he was—I found out—he was the Minister of Defense for the whole Southern region. And the people who stood up at his services and told the stories of what he did that helped their lives, I, I, I was hearing for the first time, and I thought "what an amazing guy" and then I got this light that came on that answered a question that I had always had, that I never really ask anyone: I always wanted to know why did I view and see and feel things the way I did from that perspective and it was because of who he was. And I, and I saw that and everything, people said nobody had ever come to me and told me those things. And I remember at his—he was a, he was a veteran—and at the cemetery his, his—when they laid the—American flag and folded it up and gave it to his wife, at the end, she came up and she said, "Barrett, come up here. Here is something your Daddy wanted you to have." And it was a red, black, and green flag that—which was the red, black and green flag of the Movement—and, and, and I felt something that moment I hadn't felt in all my life. So, you know, if you pay attention to and respect history, you can understand the now but more importantly, you can understand the responsibility you have for the future, and you can't walk away from that. You just can't. It's just something inside you that kinda makes you do it.

HARDY: No closing remarks, I just appreciate the opportunity that you've given us to just be here in this moment in time and express our feelings and gratitudes towards the Freedom Riders, they have made any accomplishments that we've enjoyed... it was because of them.

WELCH: Thank y'all for sharing. And you're right, people are gonna hear this one day and it's gonna inspire them, hopefully, to do the same thing that y'all did.

HATCHES: Yeah.

END OF RECORDING

INDEX

Central High School, Jackson, Mississippi - 2

Civil Rights Movement – 1, 2, 4

Farish Street - 1

Freedom Riders – 1, 3, 4

Houston, Texas - 3

Jackson Fire Department - 1

Jackson, Mississippi – 1, 2, 3

Jackson State University - 4

Lamar Street - 1

Police dogs - 1

Republic of New Africa - 4

Smith Robertson School - 1

University Club - 3

Water hoses - 1