

SPEAK NOW: MEMORIES OF THE CIVIL RIGHTS ERA
RECORDING SESSIONS

Sister M. Paulinus Oakes

Moderated by LeAnna Welch-Dawson

Wednesday, June 15, 2011

William Winter Archives and History Building

Jackson, Mississippi

MISSISSIPPI DEPARTMENT OF ARCHIVES AND HISTORY
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Participant: Oakes, Sister M. Paulinus

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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.

DAWSON: Ok, Speak Now recording 012. This is LeAnna Welch-Dawson with the Mississippi Department of Archives and History. Today's date is June 15, 2011. It's a Wednesday. Now sharing her Civil Rights Era memories is Sister Mary Paulinus Oakes.

OAKES: Alright. I was a teacher at St. Joseph High School when the St. Joseph High School was behind St. Peter's Cathedral now, I mean it was behind St. Peter's Cathedral then, and I taught there in high school, we had a grade school and a high school there, St. Peter's grade school and St. Joseph High School. And I remember very well, I had a dear friend of mine, Ralph Edward King, who is still does some teaching at University Hospital, he's a ordained Methodist minister. He was a friend of mine from Vicksburg, we were neighbors and he was going to Millsaps studying for the ministry. He was one of the first ones to integrate with some Millsaps students, he integrated the H. L. Green lunch counter and got his teeth knocked out or whatever, but mostly what I knew about what really was going on was from him.

The newspapers were very, very biased Ku Klux Klan I would say probably oriented. The Jackson Daily and the Clarion, there were two newspapers, and yeah I remember very well too, Bill Minor—I had journalism—Bill Minor came and talked to my journalism class, Hazel Brannon Smith came and talked to my journalism class and that, that's where I knew some of the things that were really going on but you didn't get anything from the newspaper. And even with the Freedom Riders, they were all considered "outside agitators" and that type of thing, but I can remember the day, I was there at the convent was right there by St. Peter's on Amite—North West Street, right next to it—and, I remember when he—they—escorted him to Ole Miss. Cars were going around, teenagers, everybody was blowing the horns and I can remember the teenagers did this constantly. Poor black people who had to work and had to get the buses or whatever, they would go around in cars and they had water balloons and they would throw the water balloons at these people and it was just, it was no, no one to protect 'em really. The police just didn't protect 'em or whatever and it was just, it was just utter chaos. The days when he went up to, oh when he was on the way to Ole Miss and I remember, I remember those water balloons, and I remember teaching high school kids, you'd try to encourage them to be kind and that kind of thing but they very much into the thing. And I remember Bishop Brunini was our bishop at that time, Bishop Brunini was a native of Vicksburg. His mother and my mother went to school together. And he was a native Mississippian—a Vicksburger—and he was trying to get some peace...and worked with the Methodists and the Episcopalians and that kind of thing, and they had—I never will forget—during that time they had headlines in the paper, "Bishop Brunini- Communist," and that was, that was very hurtful to me, but anyway. But like I said you—the newspapers—you didn't know anything that was going on, but he was a, he was a...third

generation Italian from Vicksburg. His father was a second generation who started the Brunini Law Firm and his mother was Jewish. She was a Stein, a prominent Jewish lady from Vicksburg, so they were, they were Mississippi people and I guess they knew a bit about what prejudice was like.

But anyway, I, I did, you know, you just didn't know a lot. And with this Freedom Riders thing when you hear some of the stories and that kind of thing now and...oh I remember this very well too, Tougaloo—Brown University—had some kind of affiliation with, with Tougaloo, I don't know if it was directly or not, but they would send professors down to Tougaloo back in the sixties. And when they'd pick up these students that were protesting from Jackson State or Freedom Riders or whatever, they—I remember—they'd put 'em in—take 'em down—to the fairgrounds and lock 'em up or put 'em in jail, and when they'd put 'em in jail they'd say, "This is a nigger lover," and then they would get abused or whatever. And they would try to get a white professor to go with these students that would be jailed with those students which might play down a little bit of the violence they got, but I remember that and I remember talking to quite a few people who were professors at Tougaloo that, that had been jailed, and that was, that was very bad. But you certainly didn't get any of this in the newspaper, everybody was "outside agitators." But I'm sure people worried so much for their children, and like for a poor black person to be out on the streets during this time was just awful 'cause they'd probably get water ballooned from teenagers.

And...and I remember some of those things and...but I didn't know the depth, you know, of what was really happening—nobody did, really—I mean you, you had no way to get your information and that—for that—I feel very—you appreciate the press, and people look at Bill Minor now and say he's living in the past, but the past was pretty ugly and he knew a lot of the stuff that was going on that regular people didn't know and didn't get out to the general public. And Hazel Brannon Smith was one of the heroines of our time too. She ran the little newspaper, and she won the Pulitzer Prize and all that, but she was bombed. Her, her—she was up in Lexington wherever her little newspaper was bombed and whatever—she was a, a beautiful woman, and, being a teacher and talking to other teachers you, you picked up a few things. But what was really going on in your own community, it was like that book the "Mississippi: The Closed Society," it really was a closed society. And being so close to the Governor's Mansion and all that I, I can right now hear the sirens and the, the cars going around, and people yelling and all that kind of thing when...yelling obscene things and all that kind of thing when they were, when Meredith was integrating...Ole Miss.

That's about it. I mean that—those—are some of my vivid memories.

DAWSON: Thank you very much.

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