

SPEAK NOW: MEMORIES OF THE CIVIL RIGHTS ERA
RECORDING SESSIONS

Dr. John Peoples

Moderated by LeAnna Welch-Dawson

Wednesday, June 15, 2011

William Winter Archives and History Building

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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: Okay, Speak Now recording number 015. This is LeAnna Welch-Dawson, with Mississippi Department of Archives and History. Today's date is Wednesday, June 15, 2011. Now sharing his Civil Rights Era memories is Dr. John Peoples. Welcome.

PEOPLES: Thank you. Well I don't classify myself as a Freedom Rider, as such. I'm a Mississippian from Starkville, Mississippi. Went to school at Jackson State University, in the, a veteran of World War II, U. S. Marine Corps, came to Jackson State as a student in 1947, and got my degree in mathematics in '50, went to University of Chicago and got a Master's Degree in '51, and started my career as a math teacher in Gary, Indiana, in 1951. And I always had wanted to come back South at an appropriate time. My contemporaries were Charles Evers and Medgar Evers. They were at Alcorn when I was at Jackson State. I played football against those guys...yeah. Anyway, I was, I was solicited to come back to Mississippi, and at the time of my predecessor, President Jacob L. Reddix was about to retire. He enticed me to interview for his successor. So I came down in 1963 to be interviewed by the College Board, and they decided to hire me to succeed Brother Jacob L. Reddix.

So when I came back South in 1964 things were looking very bad. They were—people were—being killed and more or less, I would say, harassed for trying to vote. They had not found the bodies of the people who were the Civil Rights workers who had been killed over, I forget the name of the place. At any rate, it was not a great place to come back. But I felt, at that time, I should come back as an educator. So I came back in the fall of 1964 as the assistant to the president and professor of mathematics at Jackson State University. And after about a year, I took a post doc at the State University of New York at Binghamton to kinda prepare myself for president. And I came back in 1967. In March I became president.

Well right away things began to get kinda warm because this was the days of the Vietnamese War and the, the anti-war protests were very much in the activity. And the Jackson State students were, of course, in the midst. Governor John Bell Williams summoned me and the presidents of Alcorn and Mississippi Valley to his office. He had just, more or less, been elected that year. And he said, "I want, I want y'all to stop y'all's people from all this protesting and marching and so on." He said, "I can handle all these other peckerwoods," he says, "I know them." I'm the new kid on the block. Those guys they didn't say anything. I said, "Governor," I said, "I plan to allow the Jackson State people to protest on the campus, but not destroy property, and I will not, I don't plan to stop them from protesting against me or you or anyone else." And he said, "Young man, I appreciate your frankness. You know what, I want your band to be in my parade." This was a new thing, anyway, it turned out that, that my band did march in his parade for his inauguration. They just said, "I want to come to your

inauguration.” I was concerned about that because Governor John Bell Williams had not been thought so well as, you know, he was a kind of a segregationist, you know, and I didn't want him to be embarrassed on my campus. So I said, “Governor, I'd love for you to come, but I'm afraid if I let you say anything, you might get booed, and I don't want you to be insulted on my campus. So if you come, I, I would like to present you, but I suggest you don't say anything.” So he said, “Okay,” he wanted to come. So sure enough, he came to the campus, he and Lieutenant-Governor Sullivan, and they sat on the rostrum, behind me. I did—and I—had told my people to not insult the governor, he's our governor, and I presented him, and he got up and bowed, and that was it.

So as time went on, that following spring, my first disturbance—student disturbance—occurred when a student was speeding on Lynch Street, and ran up on the campus, and the policeman chased him on the campus. And then the kids began to yell at the policemen saying, “Get off the, off our campus, you honkies.” And so the policemen came and they sprayed buck shot, not buck shot, maybe, bird, bird shot at the dorm, but nobody was, was hit. So the kids came out on the streets and began to protest, block the streets. And the policemen came out and sprayed tear gas around the place. And we got them quiet, I thought, but, as a matter of fact, they were not quiet, completely quiet, so we invited some of the people into the president's home and we talked with them about what we were trying to do at Jackson State, and so on. So when I thought they were quiet, a bus rolled up from Tougaloo College full of their students trying to get our kids to come back out. But they didn't come back out. But the next day or so, SNCC, that's the Student Nonviolent, violent, Committee, came from Atlanta to try to keep the kids going, keep things going, they wanted to keep things hot. And I had talked with our student body president, I said, “Now if you guys are gonna do the streets, you're on your own. On the campus you may march and protest all you want.” And so they agreed not to, to get in the streets. So SNCC, the SNCC people from Atlanta came down and couldn't get our kids to go, so they started off as if they were JSU students saying, “Hell no, we won't go,” to Vietnam, of course. And they marched all the way down to Rose Street on Lynch Street, and they killed—the policemen eventually shot and a young man named Benjamin Brown was killed—down at Lynch and Rose. And I thought he was a JSU kid, but he was not. At any rate, the next day, Charles Evers called and he said, “Doc,” he said, “you want me to kinda help you out there?” He said, “I can call a meeting at a church, and I'll pull the crowd away from Jackson State.” I said, “I appreciate it, Charles.” So sure enough, he called a meeting at some church, and, and the crowd left Jackson State the next day and went over to the church. And that was my first, and that cooled down. So things were going on pretty well. And the, the next spring, I would say, the fall, that following fall of '67, one of the students came in and told me, he said, “Dr. Peoples,” he said, “Stokely Carmichael is coming to town.” You know

Stokely Carmichael?

DAWSON: Yeah.

PEOPLES: “And he's gonna be going to Tougaloo but they want to bring him over here to get arrested first.” And I said, “Well, let him come, you know, we're not gonna arrest him, well, I hope not.” But right away I called the IHL, the College Board, and at that time it was Dr. Jobe. I said, “Dr. Jobe,” I said, “Stokely Carmichael is gonna be coming to town, and they plan to bring him over here from Tougaloo to try to get him arrested. I would hope that the Highway Patrolmen would not arrest him.” Dr. Jobe called the Governor's Office, Governor John Bell Williams' office, and he sent Mr. Glazier, who was his assistant, over and he said, “Dr. Peoples, we—they—may set those buildings afire.” I said, “No, Stokely is just another young black man, and he's not gonna set those buildings afire.” “Well, we can't risk it.” He said, “We've gotta stop it.” I said, “Please don't do that.” So to compromise, what they wanted—they sent—some Highway Patrolmen in plains clothes as if they were reporters over to the campus. They wanted to put snipers on the buildings. I said, “That's crazy. Don't put snipers on the buildings.” Anyway, around 2:00 o'clock that afternoon, two small vans ran—came—up on the campus, one with Stokely Carmichael in some overalls ready to get arrested. I had told them, I said, “Don't touch him.” So my SGA president, when I said, “Welcome to Jackson State, Mr. Carmichael,” shook his hand, and he looked around trying to get arrested. And so he took him up on the campus, he began to speak, you know, and he was really an impressive looking guy, you know, a young guy with sparkling eyes, you know, and dynamic and so on. He spoke, but nobody arrested him, so he looked around. So it began to rain and so anyway the kids went inside. And one boy said, the SGA guy said, “Wanna meet our president?” He said, “Okay.” So they brought him in. And he came, he said, “You know what, those kids like you.” I said, “Thank you, Mr. Carmichael, I appreciate that.” I said, “Won't you have a seat?” He said, “Yes.” So...he said, “What about that other guy.” I said, “What other guy?” “That old guy.” I said, “Oh, you mean Dr. Reddix?” I said, “Oh, he retired.” He said, “How long you been here?” I said, “I've been here maybe about a year.” I said, “Let me talk to you. You finished Howard University, right, a Black institution?” I said, “There's a conspiracy at you to try to destroy these schools. We need people like you to help us to maintain these schools.” I said, “But would you—do you—see what I'm trying to do—say,” I said, “I'm working at my university education. We need you to protest, but not against the schools.” He said, “But some of you guys are just some dictators.” I said, “Well, there's a new, some new kids on the block, and we are not people who are going to work against you. We're gonna work with you.” And we shook hands, and at that point in time became kinda like friends.

So things went on with me more or less, except that I had to be concerned about advancing Jackson State so as to serve all the people. I had told the College Board, if I come to Mississippi, I'd want Jackson State to serve all the people, Black, White, whatever. They said, "Well, doctor, that may come in time, but you know, you'll just have to work with us." At any rate, the Black institutions had not been allowed to hire any, anything other than Black professors or Black teachers. So at my first meeting with the Board, I presented a white professor, had been an Ole Miss grad and, somehow some of the Board members felt any white person who came out to Jackson State, Alcorn, or Mississippi Valley either they were some kind of a communist or some kind of a nut, you know. Anyway, this man's an Ole Miss grad and so we hired him. From that point on I never did indicate the race of any of my presentations for employment at Jackson State. And so that, also, the College—there was more or less a custom at the College—Board meetings that the Black presidents were not seated in the lobby with the white presidents to wait to be called in. They would go back to Mr. Scott's office, one of the staff offices, or stand in the hallway. I said I'll stop this, I went and sat right down with the other presidents. They, you know, shook hands and everything, but I didn't move. And nobody said anything. And so that was just waiting for, to be broken down. Then they had a so-called President's Council in which all the white presidents were members and they would meet and recommend things to the Board. So I, asked about being a member. But at that time the president was, I won't call his name, but he was, he said, "Well John, you know, if the Legislature found out we were sitting with you guys, we couldn't get anything." I said, "That doesn't make any sense, man." "Well, we just can't risk it." I said, "Okay, we'll start a Black council." But I couldn't get the other guys to go along with me, you know. So, anyway, that next year, I tried again, and the president at that time was a Mississippi State president, I won't call his name either, but he said, "John, y'all just come on in as if you were always a member. Just come on in and sit down, act like you're a member. We're won't make a big deal of it, tell those other guys to come on, too." Other guys said, "Young man, you're moving too fast. You better watch it." But I went on to the meeting, began to make motions and second things to be sure I was on record. No big deal, nothing happened, so, the next year they made me the Council President. So, but walls waiting to be, to fall down, 'til somebody had to have the guts to do something about it. So the next concern was the Alumni Council. The five White institutions had, their alumni had a, alumni, Inter-Alumni Council, in which their, they didn't admit the members—the alumni—of the Black institutions, Alcorn, Mississippi Valley, and Jackson State to be members. So we petitioned to have our alumni become a member. They turned us down at first, but I said, "Well, we're gonna the president on this, you guys, people don't know you guys are doing this." Sure enough, they, after a while, admitted our alumni to come in with the others, so little things like that. No big deal, but because after all this was 1965 and '66 and the Supreme Court had ruled that segregation was

unconstitutional and the Voter Rights Act, you know, it's just a matter of walls waiting to be broken down. And I had vowed, if I go back South I would not accept any overt discrimination. Not gonna go out there and march in any streets or anything like that. I was just gonna, within my, you know, realm of operation, I would not accept any overt discrimination. I made that very clear to the Board of Trustees when I began to petition that Jackson State be allowed to develop its curriculum. There had been a trial, the Pratt decision, Joyce Pratt had ruled back in, I think, around 1964 or '65 that the, that the, all institutions in the South had to eliminate the dual system of higher education. And so, in Mississippi the Ayers decision, the Ayers suit pre-empted that, so we became under Ayers, but Pratt had ruled that initially, but when the Ayers son applied to Ole Miss, we had the so called Ayers thing. So, under the Ayers, the plaintiffs...I forget all the names of them but the defendants were the White institutions and the white presidents and they did not indicate the Black presidents as defendants so we were not defendants. As a matter of fact, we were to benefit because the suit said that you would, you would enhance the Black institutions so as to attract students from all races, enhance their curriculums, because at least they wanted to kind just integrate us and wipe us out, and so we didn't want that and so there was a file of what you would call a friend-of-the-court brief by an organization called NOFIAL [sp?] that these institutions would not be wiped out, but they would be enhanced so as to serve all the people. And Jackson State, of course, was gonna really benefit the most in that because it was situated such that it was more likely to attract White students and so on. So the struggle with that was such that it was against—it had—the Black colleges against the College Board because the College Board was trying to—was against—enhancing these institutions and particularly Jackson State, which was trying to upstage Ole Miss with what it was doing. But the College Board forced us to help pay for the lawyers in that they took off the top of our appropriations every year, all of the institutions had to pay the lawyers that had been hired by the College Board to fight the, this case. And the main thing was to prevent the, the so-called development of Jackson State, Alcorn and Valley to the point of serving all the people. And Jackson State being the kind of a, the way it was situated, was the one that was the most threat to, I would say, the institutions like Ole Miss and Mississippi State and so on, who was, who was, who wanted to keep us down because, after all, if we take over Jackson, that would kinda put them out. But at any rate, the Board began to kinda put pressure on me as president because I kept on recommending new degrees, higher levels of education on up to the doctoral degree. And so they aid, in effect, that Jackson State will never become a comprehensive university. And I wanted to know why. But we already, it will be duplication because we already have all these courses you asking for at Ole Miss, Mississippi State, and Southern, so there's no reason why you should do that. At any rate, I said, "I'm gonna recommend this," and so in my recommendations to the Board, I would keep asking for these degrees and things that you see out there now

coming into play, degrees in engineering, and doctoral degrees, and so on. And they would always turn me down for whatever reason. We finally squeezed in a degree in Early Childhood by working with Mississippi State, was always fighting up against Ole Miss. Mississippi State was trying to get a, a PhD in Forestry and Ole Miss was against it. So the president, president of Mississippi State said, "John, if you can get the Black, the Black board members to work, to vote with us, we'll help you get your degrees, your doctoral degree in education." I said, "Okay." So we worked and we got that going, I thought. When we got to the Board, the first thing they did was to pass Mississippi State's degree, a PhD in Forestry. When it got to Jackson State's degrees and kind of across the board in, in education, they talked and they debated, and they debated and talked about three hours though. So finally, a board member came out, he said, "Dr. Peoples, we can't get yours through. We can only get maybe Early Childhood. Either you accept that or nothing." I said, "Okay, I'll take that," to get my foot in the door. So we took that, that degree, that was our initial degree out there, Early Childhood Education. And of course we got nothing else until the ruling by Joyce Biggers that Jackson State would get all these degrees I'd been asking for over the years. But that was, that was some fight, I went through a lot, a lot of, I would say, tension from that because I was always, it was me against the board. They simply said, "Dr. Peoples, you are not cooperating with us in this, in this Ayers case." See they wanted me to more or less testify in the depositions to say that Jackson State should not have these degrees or that, that, you are too ambitious for Jackson State. I said, "Well all you gotta do is, is you don't have to approve what I recommend, I'm gonna recommend this because I think you hired me to advance Jackson State and I'm gonna recommend these things, of course you don't, it's up to you to approve or not to approve." So that's the way that went. I call that, by the way, I have a couple of books that you may or may not want in your archives, but which more or less details a lot of stuff I'm talking about. So this, we had, I call that the "academic struggle." And another part of the academic struggle was to build the faculty. In those early days, it was the way things had been in this country, or say, in the South, there were very few African-Americans who had degrees in the hard sciences. They were mostly in education because they had gone to the so-called teachers' college. When I went through Jackson State it was more or less a teachers' college. When I got to the University of Chicago I had a very hard time adjusting to the situation because I had not had the courses that were necessary in a rigorous situation like University of Chicago, the math I had taken, one professor, said to me, he said, "Where did you go to school?" I said, "Jackson State." "What book did you use in the capital?" I said, "Grant the Longer, Smith." He said, "Forget you ever saw that book, throw it away." Anyway, as it turned out that, I was able to make it because there were some Jewish kids that were very, very sharp and I was the only Black in that dormitory and so they really took me in, and those guys never stopped studying, I mean they studied all night long, a cup of coffee, they'd play a Bach Fugue, play some

classical music, and they studied some more, they set the curve. And so I got in with those guys and so I was able to survive. But I just, I was just thinking about what had happened, you know, in these institutions in which they try to keep you in a teachers' college mode and my drive at JSU was to move out of the teachers' college mode into a university mode. And back to the Ayers situation, as it turned out over the years, every time I gave a deposition I would stick to my guns about what we should have at Jackson State. And you've seen the, the results of what has happened at Jackson State, Alcorn, and Valley. All those degrees that we'd been asking for over the years, they, they had to give them up. Now it's a matter of can they keep them, because the way the College Board is set up it's a matter of whether or not this course of study is cost effective, do you have enough students involved in it to maintain that. We have a beautiful building over there in engineering and it's a matter of do you have enough students to justify having this expensive building, this expensive equipment, these high priced teachers. So the job that the people there now have to do is to get out and try to get some recruits. Now the problem will be, being able to recruit students, students from all races and creeds, particularly races. And that's been the struggle in, here in Jackson, whether or not we can get White students at the say, freshman level to come to Jackson State. The graduate students will come, the adults, but a kid just out of high school would have a hard, he has to go into a situation where the kids tend to be in this mode of chauvinist—chauvinism—you know, proud of being black, we all, you know, kind of stuff, you know, the young kids think along those lines, you know. They're looking for a civil rights cause, you know, and I understand that, but the kids don't. And I know I had a very hard time trying to get, overcome that. We hired two young, White graduates from Jackson State to be recruiters to get into White homes to talk to the kids—to the parents—about Jackson State and they still have the problem out there. They have the problem of Jackson State has a great potential to serve this city and this region, if they can overcome the situation of the stigma attached to White people going to Jackson State. It's really not like it used to be, you know, if you get a degree at Jackson State, I mean, it is, it's good anywhere. But you gotta, you have the social situation, of living on the campus that they gotta overcome. But they are making progress.

I'm saying in effect that our civil rights thing at Jackson State, in my case, was the struggle to build Jackson State into a university to serve all the people regardless of race. And in trying to do that my biggest problem was overcoming, the, I would say, the inertia of segregation that prevailed here in the South. And I'm happy to see what's going on now that we have the, the academic programs, we have the initiatives, we have the buildings, and we've yet to realize the full potential of that institution. And, now, you have any questions that you want to ask of me?

DAWSON:

So you were in which war? You said you were a veteran?

PEOPLES: World War II. I got the tail end of it. I, I was drafted from Starkville, Mississippi just out of high school and I really hadn't planned to go to the Marine Corps. I went to Camp Shelby and I actually passed a thing and someone, but when we got back to Jackson, a White, a Marine captain came in and he said, "You're a Marine." I said, "Excuse me, sir. I've already signed up for the Navy, you know," he said, "You're a Marine. Same outfit. Get over here," so I was forced into the Marine Corps, but the Marine Corps at that, at that time was extremely racist. They didn't commission Blacks, there were no Black officers. We had White officers, and, but I was able to make Honor Man in my platoon and I was assigned to be an instructor, drill instructor, so I was training other black Marines. But yes, I came to Jackson State in 1947 just out of the Marine Corps.

DAWSON: So the units were segregated, when you were in the military?

PEOPLES: Oh, yes. There was an incident of not being segregated. In order to get more GI Bill of Rights time, I re-enlisted and I was put into a schools company to train to be a radio technician and was sent to California, to Camp Pendleton, California.

And there were, they chose ten of us to be in this special training and two of us, myself and one other guy, to be trained so as to be a teacher to go back and, to the Black camp at Camp, at Camp Lejeune in North Carolina to set up a school. Anyway, when we got out there the commanding officer who was Jewish called us in, he says, he said, "You men have been over in Carolina segregated but here at Camp Pendleton you will not. In this school if you do good work you're gonna get the same grades anybody else, so I expect you to do good work." Well, we, we thought it was gonna work out like that, but it turned out that you had to deal with individuals, instructors, and so in my particular case, I was the highest ranking man in my, in my barracks and I had to drill the men to the classes and to, had to drill them to meals and so on. And here I was a Mississippi boy trying to call all those names of Polish guys, and of Russian names and so on, and I, it was really funny because one guy whose name was, it was, I thought it was Jesus, but it was, it's pronounced "Hosaus" I think it is. And so I said, "Calvin Jesus." He said, "It's Hasu." I said, "Who?" Anyway, that's just one little incident. But here's what happened in that class or situation out there. They had it set up, in that they just didn't feel that any black Marine should score higher than a White Marine. Here was a classroom situation and we're studying technology like physics. Here's a radio that we have to learn all the parts to this radio and how it works and so on and you have ten questions and each question is worth ten points. Now either you're right or you're wrong and, like in math, you're right or you're wrong. And here's a ten point question, I got a nine, nine, nine. So I don't know what's going on, the thing is right. So I went to the professor, he wasn't, I mean to the, he wasn't a, to the

teacher—instructor—who was a warrant officer. I said, and I said, “Sir, what's wrong with this?” He said, “It's insufficient.” I said, “Like what?” “It's insufficient.” “How?” “It's insufficient. Get outta here.” So I went to the, the captain who was in charge of that section. I said, “Sir,” I said, “for whatever reason Warrant Officer Massey has cut my grades down point by point, I don't know why.” He said, “Peoples,” he said, “Look, there's no way you could be as smart as these guys. You're from Mississippi and there's no way you can be as smart as these guys, but you're gonna pass this course, you're gonna get your promotion and we'll send you back to North Carolina to teach. Now just stop so much its being.” So I said, “Okay.” So I found that I just had to accept that. And they did the same thing in the, in the, in the section where we had to repair our sets, you know, we had to repair radios that go into tanks and so on. And for whatever reason, they would, they would find, they would find a way to make me, my grade lower. So when we finished the course there were several of us in, in the section, but they found a way to make my, my grade one point less than the lowest White. All the guys were smart, all these guys were very sharp guys, everybody was smart, they could. And I had a 89 and the lowest White was a 90. Everybody was smart but I said, I said what the heck, but that was California, Camp Pendleton. And at any rate, as it turned out when the war ended, the war ended while we were out there, and so the deal for me to go back and set up a school in Carolina, I thought it was still on, but somehow they finally sent us back to North Carolina, I was called in by the colonel, he said, “Peoples,” he said, “When you go back to Carolina, you may have to speak up.” I said, “What do you mean, sir?” He said, “There, there may be some problem with your rank and what you supposed to do,” he said, “I'm not gonna put a race on your transfer papers.” Anyway, they transferred me over to the White campus. We rode a train all the way from California, myself and another guy named Busby, two of us, supposed to be teachers, over to the White camp. Had, we call it, had my point. We got there and we were standing outside and heard the man inside, “Oh, boy, we got two of those hot shot Marines from, from Pendleton, man, we need these guys, we need these technicians”...So I went in, I said, “Sargeant Peoples reporting, sir”...Ok, we're glad y'all boys arrived. Send these boys back over to Montford Point. Send these boys to Montford Point,” that was the Black camp. They had a Black camp for Blacks called Montford Point. Man, they took us in a jeep, put our seed bags, took and dumped our seed bags out at the gate...Busby said, “Peoples, we might as well give up.” Man, I'm, I'm not gonna take this stuff. Anyway, when I got, got in there, I said, “I wanted to speak to,” now they sent me over—they sent us over—to the head, the head Black who was a six-striper. No black officer is a six-striper and he said, “Son,” he said, “we're glad y'all went out, out there with the white boys and went to school, but we ain't got none of this stuff for y'all to learn how to, how to fix.” I said, “Well sir, I, I request to see the commanding officer.” He was a white colonel. He said, “What? That's, that'll do no good. That's no good.” I said, “Sir, I request to see the commanding officer.” So they set

me up the next day to see the officer and what he said, "Peoples," he said, "I understand that you have some concerns." "Yes, sir," I said, "we were trained to, to be instructors in the electronics. And we, there's nothing for us to do." He said, "Well, when the war ended all that stuff that they had planned up in Washington, D. C. changed." I said, "Well, sir," I said, "I see that they are having sergeants like me to take truckloads of people over to the White camp to clean it up," I said, "I don't want to do that, sir, I hope not." He said, "Okay, I'll see that you don't." "But what am I gonna do?" He said, "Well I'll tell you what. You just stand by until I see what I can do for you." I said, "Stand by?" "Yes, you just stand by, you have nothing, you just stand by." So I was over there, they put me over in a barracks. I had to do nothing. Lieutenants, both lieutenants came in, they said, "Ten-hut!" And they said, I'm in my bed sleeping. "Who's that man there?" "That's Peoples. Don't touch him, the colonel said don't touch him." So I made all the other black sergeants mad with me 'cause I didn't have to work. I was afraid, I was, I was wondering what am I gonna do. I would go to the library and I would read books, I would play classical records and so on. And I was trying to get a furlough. And the, the black person I saw, he had hid my furlough papers. I was waiting around, man, I couldn't, I couldn't, but he'd say, "Not ready yet." So finally I went over, I ran into this guy and I said, "Sergeant," I said, "I don't know what's going on, but for whatever reason I can't get a furlough." He said, "You know why?" I said, "Why?" "You gotta come through us. These White folk here, they don't give a cent about us, man, they come over here from the White camp during the day and they go back at night. We run this camp. You went to the white man. And you went to the White and that's why you can't get a furlough, but if you come through us, man, we gotta work together." I said, "Look, what I'm trying to do, I was trying to do some things to help us." He said, "I don't care what you were trying to do, they sent you out there and filled you up with all that stuff and look what they did, put you right back here with us, you ain't got nothing to do. Come in this office, boy. Here are your papers right here. You could have been gone home. Take this and get your butt on back to Mississippi, for the furlough." That's the way that worked out. So I went home to Starkville and I'll tell this one little incident that happened, it's typical. On my way back, I stayed for two weeks, on my way back, I had to stop in Columbus, Mississippi to change...buses. And so the way they had those things back in those days of segregation, the servicemen, I mean the, the rules were that servicemen on the buses first, and then after servicemen, others get on. So the bus driver said, "Okay, I'm, I'm gonna load this here bus according to government regulations. Okay, all white soldiers." White soldiers got on. Then he said, "Alright, all White folk." The Whites got on. He said, "Alright, all nigger soldiers. Nah. All niggers, all you niggers won't be able to go. Bus is too crowded, but I guess we got, most of you can go. Be another bus tomorrow morning." That was typical of the way things would happen during those days, like, around 19' I would say, '45 and '6. Anyway, I came on back to camp. When I got back to, to Camp Lejeune, I

saw guys with seat bags, man, running toward, running toward the buses. "Where you guys going?" They said, "Man," they said, "man, they putting us out of this thing. If you got enough punch, you can go home." I said, "What?" So I went in and there it was there on the wall, "All labor letter number four twenty something." It says, "All negro marines who are not cooks, bakers, or stewards (that means, a steward is a servant), are hereby authorized to be discharged COG (that's for the convenience of the government) between the dates of July something and July something," I forgot the specific dates. I said, "What?" I said, it couldn't be that this, that my going into colonel started this, I said, something started this. Anyway, they decided that at that particular time that they were going to let all Marines who had been specially trained beyond being a cook or a servant of some sort could get out if they wanted to, you could stay in. Some of the guys said, "Man, it's gonna be a big depression. You better stay in." I said, "Uh, uh, I'm going home. I'm going to college." Anyway, I went back to Starkville and came to Jackson State. I'd really planned to, and I didn't tell you about one little thing that happened. I had planned to go to MIT or Cal Tech, in electronics. And I, I need to back up to tell what happened. When I was at Montford Point before I went to California, I was sent for by the education officer who was a young white lieutenant. And he said, "Peoples," he said, "I was looking at your service record here. Do you know you have a very high IQ?" I said, "What's IQ?" I said, he said, "That's your intelligence quo, intelligence quotient." I said, "Well, I don't know what that means." He said, "Well, the test you took down at Camp Shelby shows that you have a very high IQ." I said, "Well, thank you." He said, "What do you plan to do when you leave the Marine Corps?" I said, I said, "I'm not quite sure." He said, "You ought to go to college." I said, "Well, I really hadn't thought about it." He said, "Well, you ought to go to college." He said, "Look, here's a college catalog." He showed me a catalog from California Institute of Technology and MIT. And he said, "Take a look at these and think about it." That was the first person, a young white marine, ever talked to me about college. My parents were people who just didn't finish elementary school. And so, anyway, I went to Jackson State and, to school and, and of course I played football, track and made straight As, number one in my class and so on. And I told other stuff about going to University of Chicago, getting my degrees and teaching in Gary, Indiana and coming back South.

DAWSON: I just have one more question.

PEOPLES: Okay.

DAWSON: You said you played football against Charles and Medgar Evers?

PEOPLES: Yes.

DAWSON: Who won, Jackson State or Alcorn?

PEOPLES: I didn't know those guys then, I mean, they, they were not famous. It was back and forth. Actually, Alcorn, you know, is a historic school, I mean, Alcorn was about, next to Ole Miss being established in Mississippi.

DAWSON: Right, Reconstruction, yeah.

PEOPLES: And Jackson State had been a private school, a Baptist school until 1940. It was just about bankrupt when President Dansby was able to get the state to take it over. And when the state took it over, they reduced it to two years and called it Mississippi Negro Training School. It was no longer a college, so, so-called training school to train rural negro teachers. And my predecessor, Reddix, was able to get it back up to a four-year college within, within his first four years.

But I didn't really get to know Charles Evers until I came back down here as president because, you know, we were just young men. They were World War II vets, too and I was a World War, so the veterans kinda ran the campus, campuses in the forties, and the early fifties because we, you know, had GI Bill of Rights, we had money and all our tuition paid for and so on. And so we more or less ran the campus, I didn't, I didn't, I never knew Medgar, but I knew Charles because he was around, and we are still good friends, yeah.

DAWSON: Did your, when you were on the teams, when you traveled, did y'all spend anywhere overnight? Did you have to stay in segregated hotels or?

PEOPLES: Well, we never, we never stopped. We didn't go that far, to tell the truth. The hotel thing was experienced, more or less, when I was, when we were traveling back and forth, while I was, before I came back south, we would travel down here on vacation and, and you just didn't stop because there was no place to stop, really. So we would leave Gary, Indiana around two o'clock in the morning and travel 18 hours, there were no, these expressways were not in existence at that time, not down this way. So we would travel and if you were trying to find a restroom, it was very difficult. I recall once we were coming from Gary, south and we were, we were gonna order some gas, but we were trying to have a restroom. And we stopped and said, "Do you have a restroom?" He said, "No," so we drive on, my gas were getting low, oh my God! So finally, the guy said, "Yeah, we got a restroom for y'all, yeah, right back in the back there." And we got—and they had—the restrooms "White Men," "White Women," and just "Negroes." They had just one for, for Black people, no it said "Colored" and our daughter, Kathleen, said, she could read it, "Dad, are we colored?" And I said, "Yes, baby...yes baby, we're colored, that means our skins are colored." Anyway, it was that kind of a situation that you had, had to deal with going south. I'll just tell one or two other little situations. When I was

at Jackson State traveling to Chicago to check on being admitted to college. The way they had the trains in those days, a carryover from the days when they had the, all the smokestacks, they were then diesels, but they, they would put black people up front and White people to the rear so the Blacks would be closer to all the smoke coming down. It was still that way, so they would try to load you that way, they would put you on the train, toward the front and Whites toward the back. And they had the, the dining cars were the separating point. Well, I got on the train in Jackson and it began to move, and it was just packed, the Blacks were just packed in there, some were just standing all, and so after it began to move, I began to walk toward the, the dining car and I found that beyond the dining car there were empty, empty seats, you know, empty seats. I said, "Hmm," but the Black folk were just packed up back there, I'm sorry, packed up in the front, White people were in the caboose. When the train got to be up around Winona, Mississippi, I walked up and walked to the first car beyond the dining car which was a White car and I sat in the very first seat. I was kinda scared, I sat there and pretty soon here come the conductor. "Let me see your ticket, boy!" He says, "You can't ride in this car, this is for White folk!" I said, "Sir, are you aware that the Interstate Commerce Commission has ruled that you cannot segregate interstate passengers, passengers?" I said, "I'm going from Mississippi to Illinois, that's interstate." "Oh, you want to be smart?" I said, "No, sir, I was just telling you what the, what the law is." I was scared, but there was a white lady who looked at me and smiled, she said. I said "Boy, I've got one ally." So she just looked at me and smiled. I said, he said, "I'll be back!" The train was moving...at least the train was moving, I was really scared, but I sat there. And finally the two what they call "Passenger Agents" came back. And the man said, "Young man," he said, "You're right, you're right about what you say. But if you will just move back with your people, when we get to Memphis, we're gonna give y'all another car." I said, "Sir, isn't Mississippi a part of the Union, part of, part of the United States?" He said, "Yes." I said, "Well, I'm not gonna move." So what he did was to move all the White people off that car, but this, this white woman wouldn't move. She said, "Uh, uh." She looked at me and smiled. I said, "Thank you." And so, pretty soon the Blacks came and packed the car and she was uncomfortable. I looked at her, I said, "Thank you, ma'am," and let her know I would understand if she moved. So she bowed, and she moved, but she sat there, and I was so happy that she did in case they did something to me I wanted at least one witness, you know. But they did the same thing coming back south, coming back from Chicago to, to Mississippi. They would try to put all the Black people toward the front and White people toward the rear. I did the same thing, I walked, started walking, walked on back, 'til I got to, but I didn't stop at the first car, I went on back to the club car, the last one and sat down. And so after the train was moving for about 30 minutes up to an hour, they sent back one of the Black porters, and he said, "Man, why don't you come on back with us, man, we're having a ball back there, you don't want to be with these White folks. Come on back,

man, we be having a lot of fun back with our folks.” I said, “Man, please. Did they send you back here?” He said, “Man, come on, man, they told me to get...” I said, “I'm not moving.” So anyway, that's the way we came, I came on down to Mississippi, but I'm saying they did the same thing going south as going north on the trains. And of course...and I'm digressing a little bit but anytime I traveled from Jackson State home, in Mississippi they had curtains to separate the races. And you had to get on and stood behind a curtain. And when, and you would always, they'd always let the Black people on last. And, there's nothing you can do about that if you don't want to get arrested, you know. 'Cause I saw one guy get arrested and beat up like that, so I couldn't, you know, I didn't want to get hurt, but you just had to defy. Within the City of Jackson, they had the buses, they had a sign that said, “Negros sit from the rear to the front and White people sit from the front to the rear,” a sign like that. I said, “Okay,” so we abided by that. But when the bus, that Number Six Mill Street bus would be going out toward Jackson State, when they got out there in the all Black section, I moved up and sat right, now, these two long seats, I don't know if you've been on a bus lately, those two long seats, they were for, even if there's not a White person on board, you don't sit in these seats just in case a White person gets on, you just don't sit there. So they, I just sat there right behind, right behind the bus driver. And he said, “You can't sit there.” And I said, “Well, why not?” I said, “The sign says from the rear to the front and this is, this is to the front.” And so he didn't say anything. But when it got close to JSU I got out and ran, just in case he called the cops, you know, but I remember the one time I did that. Any more questions?

DAWSON: Uh, uh. Thank you so much.

PEOPLES: It's been my pleasure.

DAWSON: Thank you for your courage that spurred change, 'cause you made a difference.

PEOPLES: Well, thank you. As I said I don't classify myself as a civil rights, what do they call them?

DAWSON: Activist.

PEOPLES: Well activist in that sense, but I think the things that I did in one sense, defiance of the power-that-be in education—higher education—I believe that made a difference and so.

DAWSON: Yes, for generations to come, it made a difference, you're exactly right.

PEOPLES: Yes. Well, it was my pleasure.

DAWSON: Thank you.

END OF RECORDING

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