

SPEAK NOW: MEMORIES OF THE CIVIL RIGHTS ERA
RECORDING SESSIONS

Ed Payne

Moderated by LeAnna Welch-Dawson

Wednesday, June 15, 2011

William Winter Archives and History Building

Jackson, Mississippi

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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 016. This is LeAnna Welch-Dawson with the Mississippi Department of Archives and History. Today's date is Wednesday, June 15, 2011. Now sharing his Civil Rights Era memories is Mr. Ed Payne. Thank you.

PAYNE: Alright. I wasn't involved in the sense of being directly involved in the Civil Rights struggle, but my father, I guess you would say, had a minor footnote, part of it.

I'll start off by saying I was born in 1949, so all this occurred really during my formative years and so I wanted to talk a little bit just about the reflections of what it was like to be a young white child growing up in that era and maybe some reflections, since I'm now 61, on looking back at it.

If you grew up in that era, it was interesting, I remember my grandmother lived on Lakeland Drive here in Jackson and a lady lived behind her, African American, and she had a grandchild living with her. The grandchild's name was Sheila, I still remember this, even though I was six months—six years—old at the time. And Sheila was probably three years older than me, and I thought just the funniest, nicest person in the world. I just thought she was wonderful. But I remember there came a point in time where I was told I couldn't play with Sheila any more and I didn't quite understand it but I think most children had that...had that experience happen to them. You kinda knew in this vague way there were rules that didn't make a whole lotta sense to you but they were just rules, a lotta things that happen to kids, they don't understand.

I do remember being at home and Medgar...Evers gave a speech, and I'm not sure what year this was, but he, I guess did a lawsuit and he gave a speech on television. And I was just sitting there watching it, dumbfounded that this would be happening and I thought this is terrible, but I thought something's gonna happen to him. Because not that I had any bad feelings, but you knew there was this lid where certain things couldn't be done.

My grandfather, on my mother's side, was a supporter of Ross Barnett and became state bank controller under Ross Barnett. So I got to go over and meet Ross Barnett which if you're about 10, 11 years old is a rather heady experience, to have the governor shake your hand, but this lead into some interesting things. I'm gonna talk a lot about my father and use him as a reflection here because...when the Meredith situation came, and understand there was a long lawsuit before he was finally admitted to Ole Miss, so this was in the news and this was kind of building up, would Meredith be admitted to Ole Miss. And of course Ross Barnett was making speeches and riding publicity on this, and this was when I was watching all this and I thought this was great, you know I was a big Ole Miss fan and thought we've gotta protect our Southern values, you know the sorta thoughts you

have when you're 11 years old or so. So, again Meredith has not been admitted to Ole Miss but it's in the court system, and my father—and I wanna say this—was certainly not a liberal. Most people would view him as conservative. He was a World War II veteran, grew up in Bolton, Mississippi, the town that I grew up in, had pretty conventional views. But we went up to a football game, and I believe it was Ole Miss and LSU in Oxford. And we were sitting there, and at halftime they had a ceremony honoring the international students. So I'm sitting there and my father—all of a sudden I hear him—and my father was a very calm person, but he said “Damn it to hell!” and, and that was very unusual so I looked at my dad and he wasn't really even talking to me but he was looking down on the field and he said “Damn it to hell!” And I said “What's the matter?” He said “Look down on the field,” and I looked down, there were the foreign students. He said “Look at the color of their skin.” Well they were from India, they were from South America. He said, “They're just as brown as Meredith.” He said, “but Meredith has paid taxes.” And this was important to my dad, he said—he was a veteran—because he had read that Meredith had served in the Air Force, and he said, “It doesn't make any sense. They're keeping him out, and it's not about skin color, and it just doesn't make any sense 'cause look down there on the field, those people are as brown as him.” And that really caused my world to cave in. I mean, it was so unexpected coming from my father, and it was just like somebody speaking some truth, I mean instead of all these emotional things it was just logical, you know, this is not about skin pigmentation because look at these people, they're already in here, so it's got to be about something else. I will say, later on, as I moved more leftward, I'm sure my father, at many points, regretted...ever saying that. But he was a complicated man. I'm gonna think, you know when I think about my father and, and...Bolton, I'll also think that, that it's very hard when people try to picture this era...that they don't understand that there was this odd convoluted mixture of legal segregation and social stratification, but also a certain level of social integration, that was just totally strange.

When I got in my twenties or thirties I started researching blues music, and I read this book called *Deep Blues* and it pointed out that one of the first blues musicians was a guy named Charlie Patton and he came—this is what struck me—he was born near Bolton, Mississippi, my hometown. And said that he had connections with a family called the Chapman family, family of light skinned black people, and that the Chapman family were well known musicians, indeed they did the song “Sitting on Top of the World,” I mean they're—“Corrina, Corrina”—or at least they were the first to have those recorded. So my grandfather was still alive then, and I went to him, I said “Now, you're not gonna know these people but I just want to take a chance, this family called the Chapman family.” And he said “Oh yeah, I don't know,” he said “You know where our living room is?” I said “Yeah, what's your point?” He said “They played in there many a night.” And I said

“Chapman family?” He said “They lived across the street. You know they were the best musicians around. When we had a party, you know, we would have the Chapman family.” Now probably they came in the back door and did whatever, but I looked it up on 1900 census. They did live across the street. So there was this—always this—odd thing.

My father’s racial views, if you talked about African Americans in general, would probably have been fairly conventionally Southern, but like the old song, he made exceptions for just about everybody he knew personally... I’m trying to think of where I’m gonna go there. One of the interesting things was this came out later on in life because I’ve done more research on the blues musicians that were in West Hinds County and my father passed away about 12 years ago and I’m sorry in a way because it’s very funny. My father owned a store in Bolton, and people would come in on Saturday, primarily African Americans, to get checks cashed, it was the only place around where they could get checks cashed. And unless they had an account at the store the cashiers would send them in to see my father. And I would sit there and watch, and when people came in that he didn’t know, he’d say “Who’s your folks?” And people would say, my grandmother is so-and-so or my—and he would go “Oh, your daddy’s so-and-so,” or “You’re so-and-so’s boy.” It was like he had the genealogy of half of, you know, the African Americans in West Hinds County in his head, which, you know, I would just sit there and be amazed. And he would sit there and go, “Okay if this check is bad I’m gonna tell your grandmother.” You know, and people would go “Okay” and sometimes they didn’t go back to the cashier.

But anyway, so my father, who has these kind of values, I was probably about 13 years old, 14 years old, and they needed a night watchman in the town and dad knew there was this African American gentleman, older, who had insomnia and just kinda wandered around the town all night and he thought, well this’ll be fine, I’ll make him night watchman, you know, he’s, he’s around here and he likes doing it, so he did. And, maybe a week later I’m over at a gal’s house and I’m riding my bike back, to my house probably ten o’clock at night and there is a cross burning, not in our front yard but in the street in front of our front—of our yard—and, you know, I was amazed, you know, I didn’t know what would happen, you know, had my parents been killed or something, you know? So I went in, you know, woke my dad up and said “There’s a cross burning” and he said “Well, let it burn.” Dad could be amazingly calm, mother was kinda like “No, no, you’re gonna have to do something, go, go out and put it out.” So we put the cross out. It was very well constructed. I wanted to keep it, you know I kept it like in, in one of our tool sheds ‘cause it was made outta two by ours and whatever, but, and this sounds funny, but dad let the guy go. Dad probably knew who the guys were that did it, he called ‘em trash and he wasn’t, you know, really concerned about them. He said, “They’re low trash

enough to hurt that guy and if they did I couldn't live with myself." So that happened.

Now what is interesting is, dad is the mayor of this small town Bolton, and later on, the first African American councilman is Bennie Thompson. It was the way Bennie Thompson got his start and, you know, I'll say Dad and Bennie did not get along at all. Dad's view was that for reasons unknown to him Bennie didn't like him and therefore Bennie, you know, he, returned the favor. It was an interesting thing. My dad, at a certain point and, I'll say this, he, he said he was definitely making vigorous inquiries on Bennie's draft status, to see what could be done to see that he could serve his country, and I was going Dad that's...he said "Well, you know, it's just, there it is, it's politics." But I mean since then I, I've seen some stories about Congressman Thompson's background and you know, these, these little allusions to his predecessor, as kind of this white guy standing in the way of progress, and maybe in the one line version of history, maybe that's true but I go, all these people, white, African Americans, were more complex, and I go if you're gonna look at my father in terms of his relationships with Bennie Thompson, you know—you also—should look at the guy sitting next to me at that Ole Miss football game saying, it isn't about skin color and then what is it about, it's not fair.

The other interesting thing that happened for me, besides watching these things go on in this town is, because my father operated a...farm operation, by the time I was 14 or 15 I got placed on a farm crew, which was all African American, which was an interesting experience, I mean it was, I've talked to people...a guy I know that's a musician went to Murrah High School, in it's current stage where it's about 95 percent African American, and we talk about being a minority, not an African American minority but a white minority and about how you're tested. But if you hang in there and basically show you got what it takes, it's an interesting experience; to this day I really feel I have an African American sense of humor. I mean I just, I worked with this guy named Bob Brown who at that time was probably in his fifties, had one of the most amazing sense of humors, I mean he was Richard Pryor before I knew Richard Pryor. And you learned there's this sense of humor that, that presses right up to the edge and the whole thing is to see how close you can get to that edge...of humor and so I found it very interesting because I worked with these guys, day in day out, and you become friends with folks, and I remember, it's like late August and you know we're getting ready to break up, go back to school and one of the guys I'd worked with said, "Well is your school gonna be integrated this year?" And I said, "I don't know, you got anything planned?" You know and I mean we were just joking about it and, and he was going, "Well, you know, I don't know" and he said—I said—"Well, maybe I'll see ya in a couple of weeks." You know and he was kinda laughing, he said, "Well, will you have my back?" And I went, "Well I'm gonna be back here next

summer and I don't want any hay bales falling on me, yeah, I'll...I'll have your back." But it was that sort of just interesting mish-mash.

Now when I got to Ole Miss and I arrived up there probably, I think this would've been 1968, it was very interesting to realize that a lot of the people that I knew up there that were white had grown up in a totally segregated environment. I mean their racial views were very harsh because they had grown up totally segregated, I mean totally. They had gone—lived in white suburbs or white parts of Jackson—gone to all white schools, they'd never interacted with an African American. And I'm sitting up there when they make these blanket statements, I'm going "Wait, no, you know, do you know anybody?" "Well I don't have to. I know how things are." Well it was interesting because my mother went out to San Francisco—my mother and father went out to San Francisco—so this is like 1978—I mean '68—you know the hippie era, and I had told her I wanted some posters. So she goes in one of the shops out there, the story is my father, he saw these people with long hair, he just stayed in the car, he wouldn't even get out. But she goes in and just tells the guy behind the counter, "My son's weird, get him some posters." So I unroll these posters and one of 'em, and I've looked it up to make sure this isn't a faulty memory, you can find it out on Google, a cartoonist named Robert Crumb—I mean excuse, me Ron Cobb—Ron Cobb had done this poster and it's a picture of this elderly African American gentleman wearing overalls and holding a shovel, and in the background all these burnt buildings, and it says "Remember, Uncle Tom says, only you can prevent ghetto fires." So I thought well this is funny, I put it up on my wall and this is Baxter Dorm at Ole Miss. So these African American guys start coming by, looking at it going, "Oh man, we don't believe this." And they would come in and go, "Well you're either cool or bad," you know, I said, "Well come on and sit down." So we got to knowing each other and this caused my roommate some discomfort. But there was one guy up there named Sam, from Pontotoc. Sam was a African American and he was one of these fascinating characters, kinda like the book on Holt Collier. He just viewed himself as equal of everybody. The racism of the time just had no impact on him, he just, it was water off a duck's back. Sam and I got to be friends but what was interesting was he would hang around and my roommate, who again this was the first African American he had ever met, and not only does he meet him but he's not either militant or...you know defensive, he's just Sam and it was so interesting, at a certain point my roommate got drunk and said, "I have to tell you something." I said, "What?" He said, "I think Sam's a friend of mine," and I was going, "Well okay." He said, "But I've never had a black friend before!" You know, I said, "Well it is okay, you know it, it's, it's alright." You know and I think it was an interesting adventure, but I guess the point I'm making in that is that for people growing up in my era there were these two groups of people, the people that lived socially integrated lives versus the ones that really not only lived legally segregated lives but

socially segregated lives too and I think they had a lot harder time. I think I'm gonna go into the home stretch now and just say this, I mean I grew up somewhat with a guilt about all this, because you're, you're involved in this society and you're also of this generation that is also watching this narrative of the Civil Rights struggle being told on television. And if you're watching it on television you're viewing the South as this aberration, of the normal conduct of people, and so at a period of time in my twenties I wanted to escape the South because I thought by doing that, I was escaping racism and that was naïve on my part because unfortunately at that point in time, if you went anywhere and told somebody you were from Mississippi that carried a lot of baggage. Some people met you said that assumed they could let loose with their secret racism, but in other cases it was interesting. I went to Europe, hitchhiked around Europe for a year, and I was on the island of Crete. I think the name of the town was Araclia, not sure, but there was an Air Force base nearby, and so there was this Greek tavern, bar. Great music, I mean they were playing soul music and so I thought, well I want to stop in here and have a couple of drinks. Well, it turned out this was a club where mostly African American servicemen went...I don't care, you know I'm from the South, I don't care. So I'm sitting in there drinking, one, one of the guys thinks it's funny so he says, "Come on over and sit at our table." So I do and we start talking. Now this is 40 years ago but I still remember this conversation because he was from a Northern ghetto, and he started talking about it, but he didn't want to talk too much about that, but he was talking about, and again this is the Vietnam era, where there was a perception on the part of anybody in the military that people outside the military had something going against them, especially if you had long hair like me. But he was saying if you come from this environment I came from, that's chaos, there's no rules, that every day, every hour you're having to prove yourself and you get in the military, it's like the greatest place in the world because there's order, there's structure and whatever that damn fool thinks of you, if you rank him he's gonna salute you. So I mean he was talking about this and I was going, this is really an interesting conversation, we probably talked for an hour and a half, and then you know, I was talking a little bit and he said, "Where you from?" And I thought about it for a minute, 'cause I thought well, you know, it'd be easy to say Texas, Oklahoma, it'd explain my accent, but I, you know I was at this point where I said if I did that I'm disrespecting the guy, and I looked at him and I said, "Mississippi." And the conversation went dead. Now there were a couple other guys around the table, you know and it was kinda like one of those westerns, but then he looked at me, and he said, "Yeah, but you've come a long way from Mississippi, hadn't you?" And I knew what he meant and I, I said "Yeah I have." And, and he looked at the guys around him and he was gonna make sure they affirmed it. He said, "I said he came a long way from Mississippi." And they kinda looked and they went, "Yeah," and so then we went right back into the conversation and it was kinda over, but, I still think about that guy to this day.

Now it's interesting, you know, I've lived through all this life, and I'll say this, about a year ago, all these changes have happened, some people say not enough, but the mere fact that we're having the Civil Rights, the, the Freedom Riders coming back to Jackson being welcomed and posters being up. If you're of my era and realize where you came from, you go, "This is amazing!" But sometimes you don't really know 'cause you're still here, you're still of here. But about a year ago, a woman from Oakland, California was gonna come here and do some genealogy. Well I do genealogical research and we have a friend in common and they recommended she talk to me. So she came into town, she was going to be staying, doing her research and she was going to spend a month down in Hattiesburg living in a dormitory and doing the research, and I thought well this'll be interesting. We met and it was one of those things where you meet somebody and within five minutes, like, you're just friends. So she stayed here for a month and it was fascinating for me because here was somebody totally from the outside. Her father had been born in Hattiesburg but due to his own wish to escape the South and the legacy of racism, he moved out to Idaho and later on to California, so she was raised in California. I think may have made a visit or two, but just very infrequent. So she comes here and at the same time we're doing all this genealogy, I'm getting her perspectives on Mississippi and she's going—I mean it's like these—every time I would meet her it was these flash updates and so I took her out one night to see this roots band music at Hal and Mal's and she was going "Oh, it's great to hear this old time white music." And I was going, "Actually about half the songs they played were by black musicians." I said, "Because if you really get into the music, again while there was all this legal segregation, there was a lot of cross matching in the music" and I said, "I can tell you, because it's all coming out this way," I said, "in a way it sounds a lot like it would in the 1920s because African Americans were playing fiddles and white folks were playing banjos" and I said, "it was a lot more integrated then and they're only taking it back to where it originally was." So then she comes up and she goes, "Hattiesburg has a black mayor." I said, "Yeah." She said, "But it's mostly white." I said, "Yeah but he's well known." So then she comes back up and says, "I go in the cafeteria and there are all these students sitting around, blacks and whites, at the same table." I go, "Yeah." She said, "I live in Oakland, you know, I don't have—I'm a lawyer—I don't have any black friends. They're on the other side of town." I said, "Welcome to Mississippi," you know. So then she comes in and goes, "I've seen interracial couples." I go, "Yeah, yeah that's pretty well happening." And then it was like, "Wait, I saw a white family, and they had a black kid." I said, "Yeah that's adoption, that's happening." And so it was very interesting at that point in time to be listening to all these things. Now I was very careful to say, "Don't misrepresent this," I said, "yeah I'm all for all the change, and recognizing the change and nobody's happier about it than me," I said, "but number one, never forget how horrible this place was.

How truly horrible it was to keep, you know, 40 percent of the citizenry in bondage and under terror actually,” I said, “and don’t think that everybody’s heart has changed,” I said, “but in terms of what we’ve done and in terms of what’s happened because certain people were willing to put their lives on the line, it’s amazing.” And it’s amazing to see a society where after misbehaving for centuries in terms of race relationships almost like a sullen child when somebody says you can’t do that anymore, they straighten up and at least outwardly change their behavior. So, I don’t know if that tells anything about the Civil Rights Movement, but I just wanted to give some perspectives on being a kid and growing up and, and hope somebody understands that underneath all this, there were all these human strains that were taking place, and I, I hope and pray and think it’ll be for the good. And I’ll finish with this. About a month ago, I was here, at a meeting. A guy was talking about a book called *The Life and Times of Eddie Noel* and it’s about an African American man that committed some murders. And the crowd... got into arguments about the book and it divided up along racial lines. And it was very interesting because this happened and James Meredith was there, in the audience. And after all this happened, we went outside and I said, “You don’t know me, and we talked a little bit, and he said, “You know, there’s still not love in everybody’s heart and when I see this I get despondent.” I said, “This is my chance to tell you the story about my father at that football game.” So I told him the story and you know Meredith is, he’s eccentric, but I like him and I tell folks it would take an eccentric to try to integrate Ole Miss at that point in time, so I give him a lot of credit. But, so I told him this story and a smile came on his face, and he said “God sent you today to lighten my heart and you did.” And I thought well, that was a good end to the story. Thank you.

DAWSON:

Thank you very much.

END OF RECORDING

INDEX

African-Americans – 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7
Barnett, Ross R. - 1
Baxter Dorm, University of Mississippi - 5
Blues music – 2, 3
Bolton, Mississippi – 2, 3
Brown, Bob - 4
Census-1900 - 2
Chapman family - 2
Children playing together - 1
Civil Rights – 1, 5, 6, 7
Cobb, Ron - 5
Crete - 5
Cross burning - 3
Europe - 5
Evers, Medgar - 1
Family – 1, 2
Farm work - 4
Father – 1, 2, 3, 4, 7
Football – 2, 4, 7
Freedom Riders - 6
Genealogy - 6
Hal & Mal's (Jackson, Mississippi restaurant) - 7
Hattiesburg, Mississippi - 6
Hinds County, Mississippi - 3
Integration, school - 4
Integration, social - 2
International students - 2
Jackson, Mississippi – 1, 4
Louisiana State University (LSU) - 2

Meredith, James – 1, 2, 7
Military – 1, 2, 3, 5, 6
Mississippi – 5, 6
Murrah High School - 4
Music – 2, 3, 7
Noel, Eddie - 7
Oakland, California –6, 7
Outside views of Mississippi – 6, 7
Oxford, Mississippi - 2
Patton, Charlie - 2
Political views – 1, 2, 3, 7
Pontotoc, Mississippi - 5
Pryor, Richard - 4
Racism – 2, 4, 5
San Francisco, California – 4, 5
School - 4
Segregation – 2, 5
Social rules – 1, 2, 4, 5, 7
Southern values – 1, 2
Thompson, Bennie – 3, 4
Uncle Tom poster - 5
University of Mississippi (Ole Miss) – 1, 2, 4, 5, 7
Veterans – 1, 2
Vietnam era - 6
White minority - 4
Whites – 1, 4, 5