

SPEAK NOW: MEMORIES OF THE CIVIL RIGHTS ERA
RECORDING SESSIONS

Harold E. Hollman

Moderated by Amanda Lyons

Wednesday, October 12, 2011

William Winter Archives and History Building

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Post Office Box 571
Jackson., Mississippi 39205

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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.

LYONS: This is Speak Now recording number 25. This is Amanda Lyons with the Mississippi Department of Archives and History. Today's date is October 12, 2011. And I have with me now to share his memories of the Civil Rights Era Mr. Harold E. Hollman. Thank you so much for coming in today. Welcome.

HOLLMAN: Thank you. Glad to be here. I came to Memphis—from, from Memphis—Tennessee in 1960 to Jackson, Mississippi. I had an opportunity to come here and open up a new drug store that was always my desire. I'd finished pharmacy school in University of Tennessee in Memphis about five years prior to me coming down here. I'd worked in Memphis as a staff pharmacist at a hospital there, and I served two years in the U. S. Army, I was drafted in the military. And after I came back, I got married and then, anyway, this opportunity came for me to come to Jackson and open up a drug store out in south Jackson on McDowell Road. And I was really excited about that, but I knew I had to work real hard because I had to get a business going, starting from nothing and all so I had a good size bank note that I had to pay off so I was real conscience about that. So I started my work there in south Jackson and lived just about 20 yards or so from my house. And things started off pretty well, there was a, looked like a good opportunity to live out in south Jackson. South Jackson was growing at that time. But I had no idea about the race situation here in Mississippi. Even though I was from Tennessee, I just wasn't aware of it, and just had none of the feelings that the majority of people seemed to have. It was really difficult for me to believe sometime. The people, the wonderful people I met, nice people, how they'd be, they could be so vicious on race relations, it was just unbelievable.

One instance I had that really kinda got me troubled—I was—had a customer there who was a, a fireman with the Jackson Fire Department. And there'd been a little bit of talk then about hiring Jacks—black people for firemen and also policemen, but so there certainly were not any at the time. And something came up with this fireman, I just made the simple comment, “Well, I'd certainly just as soon for a black person come to my house, put out my fire as a white,” and boy, he got mad. He stormed out of the store, called up people and told 'em not to trade out there with Harold Hollman Pharmacy, go to some other drug store, and said he's just not one of us, that he thinks totally different, and just really gave me a hard time. In fact, he had some success, you know, I lost a few customers as a result of that innocent statement, although I meant it. But it was a, he really didn't like it at all. And the word kinda got around that I was a sympathizer. And they even put a KKK out in front of my drug store, three big red Ks, with a little red paint on my windows, and I got horrible phone calls. I got a call from some, maybe, sounded like an older person saying, “Are you for inter-gra-tion?” And then they'd ask me, then they'd say, “I hear you're a member of the NAACP.” They'd just really give me and of course, finally, I met, there was a Jackson police officer that was really a good friend. He

told me, “Harold, you just gotta watch what you say down here. You just have to be really, it’s just dangerous if you say anything at all.” So I really tried to keep my mouth shut because I, like I say, I was down here to, to make a home and, and build a business and become part of the community. So I tried to keep my mouth shut from then on, but I still encountered a few things, there was a fellow who was the Grand Dragon of the Ku Klux Klan, I believe that’s what his title was. His name was Sam Bowers and he lived right down the street from me. And he’d come in my drug store and he’d kinda look at me, kinda give me that evil eye look and I was always kinda anxious to get him out of the store. But I think, years later, he was active for a long time before he was ever convicted, but he was finally convicted and, I think, died in prison a few years ago.

And another little encounter I had with Byron De La Bick—Ba—Beckwith after he was acquitted the first time, here comes ole Byron De La in my store, had a political card in one hand, shook his, had his hand out to shake hands with the other, had this smirking grin on his face and told me, “I’m running for Lieutenant Governor, I sure would like to have your vote.” And I just looked at him, and then, that was about it with that. And also, right near my store, right where I lived some of the maids that worked out in the neighborhood would catch the bus there. And sometimes they would stand on my porch at my house, which I didn’t care but I decided I’d build ‘em a bench out there. So I put a bench out there, put Hollman’s Pharmacy on it to get a little advertisement for ‘em and it was a place for them to sit down while they was waiting for the bus. And it was mostly blacks that rode the buses, a few whites that rode the bus. I remember my neighbor across the street who ran the filling station and he was sincere he liked me; he didn’t want me getting in trouble. He said, “Harold, you better put two benches there. Put one for black, one for white.” But I didn’t pay any attention to that. I just disregarded that.

And another incident that was certainly unpleasant and awful, one of my customers came in the store one day and said, “Harold, did you see me on television last night?” And I had, I had saw him on television. They were integrating the lunch counter at the Woolworth’s store at Westland Plaza. And here he was pouring ketchup and mustard on heads. And he really, he was just laughing about it, he really thought he was doing something great. He really thought, boy, he was just a hero for doing something like that. And, you know, I’d seem as, it seemed like just every now and then I’d bump into these serious problems, and things were happening, there were certainly bombings going on, killings, it was just the worst time, it was just a shameful time for the State of Mississippi during this period. I couldn’t understand sometimes how some of the leaders of our city and some of our big church leaders and people, that they just watched, they didn’t do anything, seemed to me, like to stop what was going on. ‘Course I did learn a little bit later that it was so dangerous even a person who might been the

pastor of some of the big churches if he did anything they'd run him outta town just as quick as they would anyone else, it was just too dangerous. They had to do things kinda undercover. So that, it was just a, a bad situation, you know, for a long time there. And finally, of course, after things did begin, to seem to get better. But I had a reputation there all that time that I was called a certain kind of lover. And I got called, even at my church where the people liked me and I liked them, they knew I was a sympathizer. But even though I didn't say or do anything, 'cause I, it was just too, too hot to handle, so I didn't do that. But I must say now over a period of time things have changed, and even some of the people in Mississippi that perhaps are my age now. Back then they told me how sad they feel about the way that they felt during that time, the horrible things they said and did, but they've done a complete turn around. And I will give Mississippi credit for that, along racial lines, I do think they've made tremendous strides. But it's still a rough subject to deal with.

LYONS: Well, you mentioned that they painted on your windows and at your store. Did you ever feel physically threatened?

HOLLMAN: Yes, I felt that, boy, I got that cleaned up in a hurry. I didn't want that people—customers—coming seeing that KKK right there in front of my store. And, oh yeah, I felt threatened so I really kept my mouth shut, or tried to but, you know, sometimes you just say something innocently, so you had to be, I had to be extremely cautious. 'Cause I couldn't tell what those people would do. It was just South Jackson at that time, it was a, a lot of Klans people lived out there in that part of the city, 'course I guess they lived all over the state and everywhere, but they were concentrated pretty heavy out there in my area. And you never knew who they were. I just made a point not to talk about race, out of fear which I'm not—which I don't like being fearful, but it was, it was kinda fearful.

LYONS: OK. Well, did you have anything else you wanted to share?

HOLLMAN: Let's see...no, I guess one thing, it was having the encounter with Byron De La Beckwith several years later he, they did convict him, and he was in the Hinds County Jail out there. And there was a period of time in there where I was the, my pharmacy supplied medication for the jail inmates. And they're usually a rather sickly bunch. And I did go out to jail one time and delivered mail out there, and the nurse pointed out there Byron De La. I got to see him back there in the back. That was the last I've ever saw him. That was kinda interesting since I had seen him, you know, years ago, and of course not only seen him in person, all the publicity that he'd got over the period of time.

LYONS: OK. Well, thank you again for coming in today. We appreciate it.

HOLLMAN: You're welcome. It was a pleasure being here, pleasure meeting you.

LYONS: Thank you.

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