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Interviewer: H. T. Holmes

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**MDAH**

NARRATOR: George Payne Cossar  
INTERVIEWER: Henry T. Holmes  
DATE: August 16, 1973  
PLACE: Mississippi House of Representatives  
SUBJECT: Mr. Cossar's Career as a Legislator in the State of Mississippi

Holmes: Now, Mr. Cossar, would you start off first by giving us a little biographical background - when you were born, where you were born, who your parents were, etc.

Cossar: I was born in Webb, Mississippi, in Tallahatchie County, over in the Delta area of Tallahatchie County, August 26, 1907. I was the son of John Harper Cossar and Lottie Thompson Cossar. We lived at Webb until 1918, at which time my parents moved to Charleston, which is in the hill part of my county. My parents were born at Payne, Mississippi, Murphreesboro and Tillatoba, in the hill section of my county. I was named after George Payne, who the town of Payne was named after, Dr. George Washington Payne, where my grandfather and grandmother and about forty or fifty more died of yellow fever one night, in the Payne's home at Payne. Anyway, I moved to Charleston in 1918, attended Charleston High School, finished high school and went to the University of Mississippi in 1926. I went into law - at that time you had two years pre-law and three years law - so for five years I was at the University, and finished in 1931. At the University I had quite a number of honors including Colonel Rebel, head cheer leader, Hall of Fame, president of my fraternity, president of ten or twelve other....

Holmes: Which fraternity?

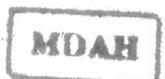
Cossar: Sigma Nu Fraternity...president of a number of organizations including Blue Key, at that time, and Cardinal Club. I came into law practice during the starvation, you might say, period of the law practice, and taught school for two years at Payne, Mississippi, a little consolidated school there about six miles south of Charleston, and taught there for two years and practiced law in the afternoon - taught school and coached down there, coached basketball. Then I went into the full practice of law. Married Elizabeth Finney, originally of Brookhaven, Mississippi, on December 31, 1933, and I have lived and practiced law in Charleston all of my life. I got into politics about 1932 - ran for an unexpired term there in the legislature and was defeated. I went into law practice and practiced law there in Charleston. I was elected to the legislature in 1944, during the Tom Bailey administration. Tom Bailey and I were very, very good friends. Tom was former Speaker of the House, an able governor, knew how to work with the legislature. Of course, Tom died. Then I had twin sons - had three sons, my oldest son practices law with me - and then I had twin sons who had asthma very bad, and it was kind of rough on my wife to raise those boys, so at the end of my 1944-1948 term, I didn't go, didn't run for anything. I stayed out of politics. In 1952, I came back to the legislature and I've been in the legislature ever since. I've served under seven different governors: Bailey, Hugh White, Coleman, Barnett, Paul Johnson, John Bell Williams, Bill Waller.

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- Holmes: What prompted you to run for representative that first time?
- Cossar: Well, law practice was rough, that was like I said, during the Panic. We made a thousand dollars a session at that particular time, and that was a lot of money. Ten cents a mile coming down, that's the only mileage you received, and we had no expense money or anything like that; but I knew a number of young people from Mississippi State and from Ole Miss that were in the legislature, and I just thought I could do my county a good job down here. I got in with Mr. Sillers right off, and helped elect him his first time, which was when he was elected in 1944 and where he served until his death. He and I were very, very close. He taught me the rules, and how to preside over the House. He gave me a lot of good advice. Mr. Sillers dedicated himself mostly to public health, and he always told me to concentrate on something rather than shoot a scatter gun, to kind of load for something that could help your county; so I concentrated on highways. The highways of my county were mostly dirt and gravel, so I began to work to place them on the state system and get them maintained and see them paved. Now I have paved highways all over my county. And now working on the interstate system, and things like that. So, I think if there's one thing besides the education - universities and colleges I've been dedicated to, higher education, secondary education - then highways have principally been my concern. I have for a number of years served on the Highway and Highway Financing Committee. When I was elected in 1944 Walter Sillers named me as Chairman of the committee of University and Colleges. This resulted from insistence of Governor Tom Bailey and because of my record at Ole Miss.
- Holmes: That was unusual, wasn't it?
- Cossar: Yes. So from then on to now, I've been in the legislature.
- Holmes: There's one thing I'd like to ask you...the various positions you've held in the House, chairmanships, and of course, you're chairman of the Rules Committee now.
- Cossar: Yes, like I said, as a freshman I served as chairman of the Universities and Colleges, and after I came back to the legislature, I was the campaign manager for Mr. Sillers every time that he ran. I don't think he had opposition but maybe once or twice...chairman of the Rules and chairman of the Universities and Colleges has been the extent of my chairmanships in the House. Of course, I'm on the Management Committee now, vice-chairman of that. I've served on the Appropriations Committee. I didn't serve on Ways and Means or Appropriations Committee my first year. Universities and Colleges and Fees and Salaries, and things like that, and Highways - I wanted on Highways. I've been on Highways for practically twenty-eight years in the legislature. I've enjoyed my work on the Highway Committee. Most all of the laws on highways I've seen written, co-authored them or have had a hand in it.
- Holmes: You've been in for so long, and I'm sure you know many of the people there, and you've mentioned Mr. Sillers. Would you like to enlarge upon your statement about him?

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- Cossar: When I came to the legislature, Mr. Sillers was quite an issue, and, of course, the liquor situation was quite an issue. When I first came, I introduced a bill to legalize liquor. It was not received too well by the Baptist circles, but Mr. Sillers had tried and tried to legalize it, and, of course, the black market tax was started. It was more or less conceived by Judge Kuykendall from Charleston, at that particular time. Mr. Sillers was a great Mississippian, and the fact that he was from the Mississippi Delta was quite a controversy when I first came to the legislature, because they thought the Delta was running the legislature. Usually the hills and the Coast and everything else was against the Delta, and they made an issue that they were going to overthrow Mr. Sillers and his cohorts. When they came down here and found the fairness of Mr. Sillers, they were very much surprised. People had a wrong conception of him as to his type. He was a fair - he was one of the fairest men I ever knew - and a very thorough man. He would research everything in the - any rulings that he made, he would satisfy the ones who raised the point of order in that he'd give them background and citations and things like that.
- Holmes: How did the idea that he was a tyrant get started? Through the press?
- Cossar: I think mostly his fight for liquor - legalization of liquor. Because the Bible Belt area in the hill section and the prairie section and along the Alabama line was quite a controversy. Other than his stand on liquor and things like that - and being outspoken for the legalization of liquor thinking that it was better than what we had at that particular time in the bootleg field - he could have been elected governor; but his belief in the legalization of liquor, of course, I don't think he could have ever been elected. He was really "governor timber" and would have made an excellent governor.
- Holmes: What about Hilton Waites?
- Cossar: Hilton Waites was an outstanding man, a fair and thorough man. He was chairman of the Ways and Means Committee for a number of years. "Scrap" Woolfolk was an outstanding leader during the Bailey administration. The state office building was named in his memory. There have been some outstanding chairmen of committees during my term. As chairman of Appropriations we have had Holmes, Swango, Holloman, Junkin and Stephens. As chairman of Ways and Means besides Waites there have been such able men as Walter Hester, Charlie Jacobs and Buddy Newman. I regard all these men as good conservative statesmen.
- Holmes: I'd like for you to talk about the governors that you've...whose administrations you've served in. You started off with Governor Bailey....
- Cossar: Governor Bailey was a legislator's governor in that he had served as Speaker of the House, and had come up through the ranks of the legislature. He knew the problems of the legislators and he was very, very considerate of the legislators. It was a tragedy that he was sick and later died. He was an outstanding man, an honest man, and a very able man. Then Hugh White, of course, served twice. I was under him...and I served in the House with Hugh White. Hugh White was a big man for Mississippi, interested in industrial development of Mississippi, and he was a great man on highways, too. He made us an excellent and honest governor. J. P. Coleman was a brilliant man. J. P. Coleman and I didn't

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always get along too well, because J. P. Coleman at that time was quite egotistical, and he spoke in the first person more than...in other words if the legislators, if we passed something, he'd say, "I did this, and I did that," rather than "we" did it. But he was a very able man - one of the smartest governors we've ever had. Of course, he served in all branches, on the Bench, attorney general, governor. And I also served in the legislature with J. P. Coleman. He was an excellent legislator. I reckon Ross Barnett would be the best governor insofar as the legislature's standpoint is concerned, in that he could get his legislation passed better than any governor I've ever served under. Ross had his faults, and he liked to speak, but Ross shared the glory of his administration with the legislature. Ross Barnett was the type of man that if you needed four or five votes to pass a bill, the next morning he'd have those four or five votes for you, and he'd tell you he was going to deliver - and he was going to deliver! Paul Johnson was also an excellent governor. He had also served as lieutenant governor, and he knew about the workings of the legislature. I served on the Building Commission first under Ross Barnett and then Paul Johnson and then John Bell Williams. Paul was a good governor to work with and was a hard-working governor. And of course, John Bell Williams, I reckon, was as honest a governor as we've ever had, and he did much to start this giant highway program we have. The health program and the big medical center and all had its birth pretty well during the Hugh White administration...grew out of that. Now, of course, Waller by not having legislative experience prior to his election as Governor has handicapped him in working with the legislature. Had he conferred with legislative leaders on all issues instead of some of his advisors who knew nothing of the legislature, I believe he would have been on better terms with the legislature. After serving with seven governors I am firmly convinced that the people of Mississippi should require a candidate for governor to have prior legislative experience. And then as he sits as an executive he will be in better position to know the functions of the legislature and dovetail the workings of the legislative and executive branches of government.

Holmes: What about the governor succeeding himself?

Cossar: I would not object to submitting Constitutional Amendment to the people permitting the governor to succeed himself. I am firmly convinced that no governor I have served under could be reelected. As a general rule, at the end of their term they are not as popular as at the beginning of the term. Governor Waller is pushing such an amendment but I do not believe it will pass the legislature.

Holmes: How many senators, national senators, have there been since you've been in the legislature?

Cossar: Pat Harrison was senator, and died, and Wall Doxey ran, and then Jim Eastland was appointed by Paul Johnson to succeed Pat, and then Jim ran and won it - beat Wall Doxey. Then, of course, I served under

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Hubert Stevens. Mr. Stevens was a senator - up in New Albany - and Stennis succeeded him, didn't he?

Holmes: That was before my time. But you've only served under two Speakers - Mr. Sillers and Mr. Junkin.

Cossar: That's right.

Holmes: In looking through the history of the last twenty or thirty years before I came down here to talk to you, I ran across several issues that seem to have recurred throughout the years since you've been in office, and I wondered if you could talk a little bit about those. Of course, roads is, I guess, one of the biggest issues....

Cossar: Yes....

Holmes: ...and that's been your primary concern.

Cossar: Yes.

Holmes: How has the road situation in Mississippi changed since you've been in office?

Cossar: Well, I think it's slow, slow in changing, but now it's been an issue... Hugh White made the first step in "getting us out of the mud" so to speak; but since that particular time, it's been slow but it really became geared during the John Bell Williams administration when we gave three hundred million dollars. Then, of course, during the Waller administration we have added six hundred million dollars which should resolve our highway problems. As long as people can get gasoline and there is no shortage and taxes come in as projected, we should have the greatest highway system of the south.

Holmes: What about education and the issue of segregation?

Cossar: Well, I can't...we passed every law in the world we could to preserve the segregation in our schools. And our theory all the time started under Coleman, was "separate but equal," and that's when we began to consolidate schools and build Negro schools of the same calibre of white schools. Up until then, most of the Negroes were in school houses, I mean church houses, out there with a big bellied stove, and really had no facilities and really, they were entitled to more than that. When we thought we fixed them up and had them separate but equal, we thought that was all right. Of course, under the Brown case, they set aside all of that. But I did everything in my power to preserve segregation, and voted all the way through to do such as to...until the Supreme Court started legislating.

Holmes: That provided an interesting chapter in Mississippi history with the Dixiecrats and Fielding L. Wright as their vice-presidential candidate. And then I noticed a few years later that J. P. Coleman was mentioned as a potential vice-presidential candidate on the Democratic ticket.

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Cossar: Yes, when they had the...I believe Fielding L. Wright was one of the Dixiecrats with....

Holmes: Strom Thurmond?

Cossar: Strom Thurmond. I was an elector under the Byrnes...when Byrnes was running. I don't know whether he was Dixiecrat or maybe Independent. I was an elector for him and I was also an elector when George Wallace ran, the time that Nixon beat Humphrey in a close race and George had...it was quite exciting at the end there. We thought maybe that the Wallace votes might have to swing it one way or the other, that election was so close. But I served as an elector on the George Wallace and on the Dixiecrat. I think you're going to have a lot of consideration for Independent candidates, neither Democrat nor Republican, especially after Watergate and some of the situations that are developing fast with the Democrats not having the caliber of person that people would like to have. Certainly the McGovern type won't go over. The people of the United States demonstrated by their vote before that they weren't interested in "hippie" movements and so forth like that electing presidents.

Holmes: What about during the regular business of the House when they're in session? Do you remember any particular incidents on the floor that are outstanding, or any big debates, or fights, or anything like that?

Cossar: We've had knock-down, drag-out fights on congressional reapportionment. Back years ago, I was on the Apportionment Election Committee and George Howell, who is now a teacher at the University of Mississippi - government, I think he teaches up there - and we apportioned the legislature - I mean, the Congress - each time for about eight years straight we'd lose a congressman by a loss of population, and as you lose a congressman you're going to have to put two congressmen against each other. Jamie Whitten is in my district and my neighbor. We tried our first law suit together. I have been in position to look after him in these reapportionment battles. One of the largest battles that I was in, was the time when the legislature put John Rankin and Tom Abernathy in the same district. My opposition tried unsuccessfully to put Rankin and Whitten together. This was a bitter battle and separated a lot of us who were friends for many years. Then a few years later, we lost again, and that particular time we decided to put Frank Smith and Jamie Whitten together in the same district and spread it all the way to the hills. Frank Smith, of course, is not too proud of the fact that he knows me even today, and we had quite a battle on that. We won on that one. Of course, we put them together and then Jamie beat him in the elections later on. Our congressional reapportionments - there have been some terrific battles in this House on two different occasions; but now, of course, this last time we levelled off and didn't have to put anybody in, and it looks like our population has become stabilized. We had quite a battle over the beginning to build the medical school - a great battle. Mr. Sillers and I, we didn't want to build the medical school at the time that

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they built it, so we delayed it for a couple of years until another administration, because we felt that you should have some hospitals first. In other words, it's just like letting a person graduate from law school and not having a court house for them to practice in. So we figured that the best thing to do to attract doctors - and we did have a shortage of doctors - was to build an attractive hospital and bring the hospital - get the hospital set up first to meet the needs of the health of the people - and then build our medical center; and as we build our medical center we'll have the attractive hospitals around to attract the graduates as they come out. Then we set up the scholarship system in there whereas to try to keep these doctors in Mississippi and in towns of less than five thousand. We forgave and financed their education; for each year that they'd serve, we forgave one year of their cost. That worked for a long time, but eventually they began to move into the cities and pay off their debt there, so now there are no restrictions much on education. Of course, we had a big battle on the legalization of whiskey during Paul Johnson's administration. The black market tax was a big issue. We passed that, you know....

Holmes: Yes. Talk about that a little bit. That's a curious chapter, too.

Cossar: That was conceived by, like I said, Judge Kuykendall from Charleston, Mississippi...passed a tax on illegal commodity, I reckon you'd call it, just put a ten cent - ten per cent - tax on slot machines, whiskey, and everything else; and then the tax collector at that time would collect it, and he'd retain ten percent for his collection, and, of course, the tax collector made more money than any man that held office in Mississippi. This, of course, was abolished after the legalization during the Paul Johnson administration.

Holmes: William Winter was tax collector at the time it was abolished.

Cossar: Yes. He recommended that it be abolished.

Holmes: Is it true that he offered the only serious challenge to Mr. Sillers for the Speakership?

Cossar: At that particular time we had 142 members of the House. Mr. Sillers received 96 votes out of the 142. This was not much of a challenge.

Holmes: Do you know what prompted - what would prompt a young representative to try to challenge such an able man?

Cossar: He thought he had the backing of Governor Coleman. Governor Coleman and William Winter were very close. William Winter thought that he had the backing of Governor Coleman, and generally when the governor backs a man he's pretty well successful. But Mr. Sillers was so unusual, and practically all of his old leaders (and I was his campaign manager at that particular time) were against William Winter. Mr. Sillers was so outstanding that I don't believe that if Governor Coleman had gotten in there and made an issue out of it he could have won, and I think that Governor Coleman realized this. So at the time of the election

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for Speaker, Governor Coleman was, I think, out of state at that particular time - Ole Miss was in some football game somewhere. William resented that. William Winter resented it for a long time, and then, of course, the governor reached over and grabbed him out of the legislature and gave him this plum when Mrs. Tom Bailey died, and William Winter came in and became tax collector, and it made William Winter hundreds of thousands of dollars, so that kind of mended their little differences they had because he figured he'd let him down in the Speaker's race.

Holmes: It should have made a lot of difference! What about social life during the sessions - the parties and everything through the years?

Cossar: Most of the time - when I first came to the legislature, practically everybody stayed at the Edwards Hotel. There was no such thing as apartments like they have scattered all over town now, and the social life was usually around rooms in the hotel; and the people would gather in the various rooms and the Petroleum Club up there. Then the regular group - the truckers had a room up there where they entertained practically every night - and lot of other people, but it was all centered around the hotel. Then when they had the integration...

(End of Side)

...After they had the forced integration of the hotels, the Robert E. Lee then organized as a club, and the legislature practically moved the entire group from the Edwards Hotel over to the Robert E. Lee Hotel. Then slowly, the Edwards Hotel began to go down and down - they didn't maintain it - and slowly legislators began to move out in groups to apartments or apartment complexes and things like that, and so that separated a lot of the social life that we had when we used to be all under one roof. Now, we just have like these various ones who are sponsoring - and the people who have the Monday night little eats and parties like that - is about all we have now, unless there's something special, some special lobby group.

Holmes: What about during prohibition? Was there a lot of liquor around during the session at the parties?

Cossar: Yes. Practically the black market faction...Rankin County, of course, furnished all the liquor; all you had to do was just cross the bridge at Dennery's and go across there and ride around and pick up your bottle and come on back...no problem to get whiskey. There wasn't very much enforcement on people in possession of whiskey, because like I said, the state was getting ten percent black market tax on it, and they weren't pushing it like they did back in the old prohibition days - and it was legal whiskey, not bootleg whiskey.

Holmes: It seems like J. P. Coleman, when he was Attorney General, really struck out at what he called "organized crime" in Mississippi. Was this something that had been here all along, or were "gangsters" moving in?

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- Cossar: I don't know. The Gulf Coast was just kind of like Las Vegas for a while, you know. It was wide open. But I think they feared that the Mafia and the gangster element was coming to the Coast area, and I think that's when they placed their restrictions stronger. He was a good Attorney General, very able man, Coleman was; and I think that today he would make a good governor - much better than he was then because I think then he was a little too egotistical at that time. I think he has learned his lesson and would make a good man now.
- Holmes: What about...he and Mr. Sillers had a big clash over the Constitutional Convention.
- Cossar: Yes. I think he called thirty-two of us "wild-eyed saboteurs" and we just were afraid of what might develop then in that particular constitutional convention. That was a big fight. You asked me about a fight a while ago, now the Constitutional Convention battle between the legislature - the House, mostly, and the Senate, was quite something...and the governor, especially.
- Holmes: What if the governor, or a governor, were to call for a convention today. Do you think he could get it?
- Cossar: I don't think so. We've been amending the Constitution pretty well, and striking out all the dead wood, and I don't think we really need it like maybe during the Coleman administration. I think that the amendments that we have in it - and the things that the Supreme Court has struck out we've removed - so a lot of things in our Constitution were isolated and old and non-enforceable, and pretty well lot of that has been cleared out in recent, the last six to eight, years.
- Holmes: That ends my list of notes to ask you. Do you have anything else you'd like to say?
- Cossar: No. I've enjoyed the legislature, part of my life being here to see that as you look over the old Mississippi Code of 1942, and our new code, to know that you had a hand in the writing of a lot of those laws; the associations that you have and the friends that you work with, and governors that you serve under, they're lasting; and you feel like somewhere by virtue of the work that you've done you might have a little wee bit of footprint in the history of Mississippi, and the pace that it's made. I've always been a conservative, tried to be a conservative, and voted a conservative vote. I don't believe in spending more money than you have. Lots of times you get criticized from teachers and things like that, but you've got to bow your neck. Out of my twenty-eight years in the legislature, I've had opposition twice. The toughest race I was ever in was when former Sheriff Strider ran against me. Sheriff Strider had become famous as a result of the Emmet Till trial in my county. He and I had been good friends. I helped elect him Sheriff. I beat him 104 votes out of about seven thousand. Years later after Brad Dye resigned from the Senate I was campaign manager

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for Strider and we won it. Senator Strider and I worked together as a good team for our county of Tallahatchie. He died while serving in the Senate and his son Donald Strider was elected to fill the unexpired time and has since been reelected. Donald Strider is a good senator and works with me. My other opposition was in 1943 when I first ran for the legislature. My people have been good to me.

Holmes: That speaks well of you, too. I thank you for your time this afternoon. I enjoyed it.

Cossar: Thank you.

(End of Tape)

Transcribed by Mary H. Mingee

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## INDEX

By Catherine Mills

Abernethy, Tom: re-apportionment problem, 6

Apportionment Election Committee, Mississippi House of Representatives,  
See, Cossar, George Payne

Appropriations Committee, Mississippi House of Representatives, 3; See  
also, Cossar George Payne

Bailey, Tom, See Mississippi, Governors of

Barnett, Ross, See Mississippi, Governors of

Black Market: liquor, See Prohibition years

Black Market Tax, See Kuykendall, Judge; See also Public issues

Charleston, Mississippi, 1, 2

Coleman, J. P., See Mississippi, Governors of

Congressional re-apportionment, See Public issues

Constitutional Convention (proposed), See Public issues

Cossar, Elizabeth Finney (Mrs. George Payne), 1

Cossar, George Payne, interview; youth and background of, 1; law practice  
 and teaching in Payne, 1; law practice in Charleston, 1;  
 ---Political career: elected to legislature, 1; reason for  
 running, 2; protege of Sillers, 2; interest in highway system  
 and secondary education, 2; member of Highway and Highway  
 Financing Committee, 2; Chairman, Universities and Colleges  
 Committee, 2; Chairman, Rules Committee, 2; Campaign manager  
 of Sillers, 2; Vice-chairman, Management Committee, 2; member,

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MDAH

Appropriations Committee, 2; member, State Building Commission, 4; member, Apportionment Elections Committee, 6; elector for Byrnes and Wallace, 6; comment on Independent candidates, 6; comment on Governor's self-succession, 4; reflection on career, 9-10

Dixiecrats, 5-6

Doxey, Wall: running for Senate, 4

Dye, Brad, 9

Eastland, James O, See Mississippi, U.S. Senators of

Edwards Hotel, See Social life of legislators

Gulf Coast (and organized crime), 9

Harrison, Byron Patton, See Mississippi, U.S. Senators of

Health Program, under John Bell Williams, 4

Highway and Highway Financing Committee, See Cossar, George Payne

Highway Program, Cossar's interest in, 2; Cossar's participation on

Highway Commission, 2; Waller's improvement on, 5;

White's improvement on, 3, 5; Williams' improvement on, 4, 5

Howell, George, 6

Junkin, John R., See Mississippi, Leaders of

Kuykendall, Judge: Black Market tax, 3

Liquor, legalization of, See Public issues

Management Committee, Mississippi House of Representatives, See Cossar,

George Payne

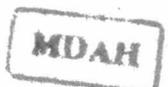
Mississippi, Governors of: during Cossar's career in legislature,

Bailey, Thomas L., 1, 2; Cossar's opinion of as governor, 3;

Barnett, Ross R., 1; Cossar's opinion of as governor, 4;

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Coleman, J. P., 1; Cossar's opinion of as governor and legislator, 3-4; potential Vice-Presidential candidate, 5; backing Winter, 7-8; against organized crime, 8-9; and Constitutional Convention, 9; Johnson, Paul B., Jr., 1; Cossar's opinion of as governor, 4; legalization of liquor, 7; Johnson, Paul B., Sr., appoints James Eastland as U. S. Senator, 4; Waller, William L., 1; Cossar's opinion of as governor, 4; pushing amendment for governor's self-succession, 4; White, Hugh, 1; Cossar's opinion of as governor, 3; Williams, John Bell, 1; Cossar's opinion of as governor, 4

Mississippi, Leaders of: during Cossar's career in legislature, Junkin, John R., Speaker of House, 5; Chairman, Appropriations Committee, 3; Sillers, Walter, Speaker of House, 5; See also Sillers, Walter; Waits, Hilton, Chairman Ways and Means Committee, 3; Winter, William, challenges Sillers, 7, 8; tax collector, 7, 8; Woolfolk, E. T. "Scrap", 3; Wright, Fielding, L. Dixicrat Vice-Presidential candidate, 5, 6

Mississippi, U.S. Senators of: during Cossar's career in legislature, Eastland, James O., 4; Harrison, Byron Patton, 4; Stennis, John C., 5; Stephens, Hubert, 5

Payne, Mississippi, 1

Petroleum Club, See Social life of legislators

Prohibition Years (Black Market faction), 8

Public Issues, Black Market tax, 7, 8; building the Medical Center, 6-7;

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MDAH

Congressional redistricting, 6; Constitutional Convention, 9;  
 Education, 5; Highways, See Highway Program; Legalization of  
 liquor, 3, 7; Organized crime, 8-9; Segregation, 5

Rankin, John: re-apportionment problem, 6

Robert E. Lee Hotel, See Social life of legislators

Rules Committee, Mississippi House of Representatives, See Cossar, George  
 Payne

Segregation in Education, See Public issues

Sillers, Walter, against Coleman over Constitutional Convention 9; contest-  
 ing William Winter, 7-8; fight for legalization of liquor, 3;  
 fighting the building of the Medical School, 6-7; relationship  
 with Cossar, 2

Smith, Frank, 6

Social life of legislators, Petroleum Club, 8; Edwards Hotel, 8;  
 Robert E. Lee Hotel, 8

State Building Commission, See Cossar, George Payne

Stennis, John, See Mississippi, U.S. Senators of

Stephens, Hubert, See Mississippi, U.S. Senators of

Strider, Don (Mississippi Senator), 10

Strider, Sheriff (Mississippi Senator), 9-10

Tallahatchie County, Mississippi, Cossar's birthplace, 1; road  
 improvements in, 2

Thurmond, Strom, 6

Universities and Colleges Committee, Mississippi House of Representatives,  
See Cossar, George Payne

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University of Mississippi, Cossar at law school of, 1; building of

Medical School of, 6

Waller, William L., See Mississippi, Governors of

Waits, Hilton, See Mississippi, Leaders of

Ways and Means Committee, Mississippi House of Representatives, 3

White, Hugh, See Mississippi, Governors of

Whitten, Jamie, 6

Williams, John Bell, See Mississippi, Governors of

Winter, William, See Mississippi, Leaders of

Woolfolk, E. T. "Scrap", See Mississippi, Leaders of

Wright, Fielding L., See Mississippi, Leaders of

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