

SPEAK NOW: MEMORIES OF THE CIVIL RIGHTS ERA
RECORDING SESSIONS

Wilson Floyd "Bill" Minor

Moderated by LeAnna Welch-Dawson & Amanda Lyons

Tuesday, June 21, 2011

Home of Mr. Minor

Jackson, Mississippi

MISSISSIPPI DEPARTMENT OF ARCHIVES AND HISTORY
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AU 992

SN 019

Participant: Minor, Wilson Floyd "Bill"

Title: *Speak Now: Memories of the Civil Rights Era* / Memories of Wilson Floyd "Bill" Minor, Tuesday, June 21, 2011 / moderated by LeAnna Welch-Dawson and Amanda Lyons

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.

**Mr. Minor was unable to come to the Winter Building. Mrs. Dawson and Mrs. Lyons photographed Mr. Minor and conducted the recording session at Mr. Minor's home.*

DAWSON: Okay, this is Tuesday, June 21, 2011. I'm Leanna Welch Dawson, volunteer with the Mississippi Department of Archives and History. Today sharing his Civil Rights Era memories is Mr. Bill Minor.

MINOR: Thank you, LeAnna.

DAWSON: Thank you for talking with us.

MINOR: I hope we're not gonna cover the whole subject of...

DAWSON: No, no, no.

MINOR: Because it's too much, I think we need narrow it down to certain things. I believe you wanted to specifically talk about the...

DAWSON: Freedom Riders.

MINOR: The Freedom Riders and I have a, a unique connection, I guess you would say I'm, I'm the only living journalist in Jackson area who, who actually covered the arrival of that first Freedom Rider bus in Jackson at the Trailways bus station and there have been some pictures I see that appeared in the, here the recent 50th anniversary commemoration that was held, photograph of the Freedom Riders being loaded into the paddy wagon to be taken off. And though it, the photograph does not show me from the front, it does show me from the back, I can identify myself right there at the, at the scene and, and notably, I have a pad and pencil in my hand...that's, of course this is, back in, this is in 1961 and that was, there were no, you didn't walk around with laptop computers or anything like that. Also I had a coat and tie on, I mean think now, in those days we...reporters had—there were two reasons, I guess—one was it sort of became like the uniform of the day to be wearing a coat and tie, but also, it sets you apart from the...from the, the crowd and you were more likely not to be set upon by thugs or...or the...the racist people who were attacking anybody, I mean, Blacks or any Whites who were mixing with the Whites—I mean with Blacks—one of the most brutal things I ever saw in all my life in those days was to, to, to see a, a white professor from Tougaloo...who was going with the Blacks who were staging a march, a voter march, in 1963 and he was attacked by police with a, with these long billy clubs and they just chased him up on the porch of a house and, but, and just pounded him with this billy club on the head. How the guy didn't have a...fractured skull right there I don't know, but it sounded like, like Mickey Mantle knocking a home run out of Yankee stadium. But I'm just saying that if Whites who were...helping Blacks openly, they were, they became prime targets for the, for the crowd and even for the police, but getting off on those subjects, the, the Freedom Riders were, arrival in Jackson was done under some special situation. Now remember, this is in 1961, this was before the real, the Civil

Rights movement became much more aggressive and widespread in Mississippi. The only incident that had ever happened, the only challenge to the barriers of segregation of public facilities had taken place only a couple of weeks before that when a group from Tougaloo College, an integrated group I might add, staged a sit-in at the lunch counter at, at the Woolworth, Woolworth was a big...chain of dime stores all over the country, they are long, they are long gone now, but F. W. Woolworth was known nationwide as a, as a popular...low price store that sold all kinds of small good, novelty goods and it also had a lunch counter where people could go have...small sandwiches and so on, but anyway that had happened just a matter of, just a couple of weeks before the arrival of the, of the Freedom Riders. Now there was no indigenous movement among Mississippi Blacks to challenge the system of segregation, had not been organized, as a matter of fact, Medgar Evers who became the real hero of the Civil Rights Movement and gave his life, actually, on behalf of his work, was, was, actually he had spoken out against the Freedom Riders coming in, I mean, that shows you how it was a, it was a, sort of a too much of a novelty to people back then to come in and, and challenge the segregated waiting rooms at, at...in these terminals, in the bus and train and airport terminals. And so it was not, it was not done with any enthusiasm by...excuse me just a minute please. Emma.

EMMA: Yes?

MINOR: Emma.

EMMA: Yes sir?

MINOR: She's turning that television up and the sound is coming in here.

EMMA: Okay.

MINOR: So, the point I was making is that...the Civil Rights Movement as such had really not, not begun in, in Mississippi, I mean, there had been incidents that had taken place, like going back to the, the murder of Emmett Till in 19, in 1955, and then the lynching of Mack Charles Parker in, in Poplarville in Pearl River County in 1959, both of which, I mean, they became celebrated cases, but they...Emmett Till for example, was not—had not—he was a school boy from Chicago who had, who was just down here to spend the summer with his, his in-laws in the, in the little town of Money, Mississippi...that's, that's a laugh to think this little bitty poor town is called Money, in the Delta, anyway, he was not down here to march or protest for integrating facilities or anything like that, I mean so, even...it has been put in the history of the Civil Rights Movement as sort of a...like the part of it or the beginning of it and I have a hard time accepting that and then of course when you put in, next in 1959, the, the lynching of Mack Charles Parker. He was being held and was about to go to trial for raping a

white woman on...she and her husband and child had broken down, their car had broken down on Highway U. S. 11 and in, and...at night. Anyway, she was, she was raped inside the car and the state had a pretty good case against...Mack Charles Parker, but the trial was to begin on Monday, and on Friday night, this lynch party goes into the jail takes—with the help of somebody on the inside left the key to the jail in a certain place for them to get in—anyway he's taken out and killed and his body dumped into the Pearl River. It, it's cruelly humorous to think about dropping bodies in the rivers. I mean, Emmett Till's body had been dropped in the river, the Tallahatchie River, and, and Mack Charles Parker's body's dropped in the Pearl River. One at one end of the state and one at the other end of the state.

These are not—I mean these were really—had no real...they were not part of any protest against segregation you see, so you have to...you have to sort of begin with like the, the sit in at the Woolworth lunch counter and then the, the Freedom Riders arriving in the state, and what was not known then that this was going to be the beginning of a, of a huge influx of Freedom Riders. The idea caught on nationally and there were, so there were...people who volunteered to ride these buses, who coming in from all over the country. And in one instance, there was a busload of...Episcopal ministers and one of the Episcopal ministers happened to be a, a grandson of, of John D. Rockefeller, I mean so...these, these strange things were happening. But anyway, for that entire summer, '61, there were like 350 Freedom Riders in all came in and of those, what made this different was that, strangely enough Ross Barnett, who later turned out to be...the obstructionist in the, in the James Meredith case just a year later, had been contacted before the Freedom, 'course you see the, the Freedom Riders had, had a route to go through Montgomery, Alabama and Birmingham and then Jackson and on to New Orleans was the, was the ultimate goal that they wanted to get to, but when they got into Alabama they were, when the bus came into, well actually, two buses started out—I mean, came—one bus started out and then the second one—bus—and both of them were stopped in Alabama. They were set upon by the white...thugs and the bus was set afire and so on. The bus that came here, what is so historic about it...is I, there were 13 Riders on the bus that arrived at—the first bus that arrived—it was at the Trailways bus station which is now on, it's on Pearl Street, where now I think is it would be the, the state—I mean the city—Jackson Convention Center and...at, on there, there were 13 Riders on there and as they got off, see, well anyway I need to go back to Ross Barnett having been contacted by, after they, what had happened in Alabama, the Attorney General Robert Kennedy was desperate to, that, that there be no further violence like that in, when they arrived in Mississippi, so he had spoken with, with Ross Barnett who assured him that they were, they would be protected when they got to, to Mississippi and, but they were gonna, that he was gonna put some National Guardsmen on the bus when it arrived at the state line which is what they did and, and actually the bus was followed by

a couple of car loads of, of...of National Guardsmen when it came from Meridian to Jackson, but on this bus, when they stepped off and I being right there to watch them as they step off, but among them, 'course, at this time, you know, you...the people who...like, there were...all but, they were, all but two of 'em were black and, and most of the Blacks were like college students...and they're 19 years old or, or 20 years old and...and among the students, I mean the Blacks who get off, one of 'em is a, is a guy named John Lewis who today is Congressman John Lewis from, from Georgia and who's been in Congress now for almost 30 years, I guess, and is considered the icon of the Civil Rights movement in...in, in the Congress. He gets off and behind him is a National—a Mississippi National Guardsman Lieutenant Colonel—who had been put on the bus when it arrived and that Lieutenant Colonel happened to be G. V. "Sonny" Montgomery who was then a state senator. A state senator, mind you, who later would go to Congress and he and John Lewis would become colleagues in the, in the United States House of Representatives, I mean, is this a strange twist of history? But, the, and another one since we just recently had this commemoration, the guy who was on the bus and who has emerged as a, sort of a leader and spokesman now for the Freedom Riders is Henry "Hank" Thomas, who is a highly successful businessman in, in Atlanta, in fact as he came and spent an hour and a half...talking with me back around the first of the year. I did a, wrote a piece about him long before the formation but...and to give you the whole history like of Hank Thomas. He was a, a divinity student, I believe, at a, in a college in Washington D. C. Anyway he winds up in, in Vietnam as a, as a combat medic in Vietnam and in...some of the toughest gun fights in the, in the jungles of Vietnam and he was wounded, as a matter of fact, but he's also pulling dead, wounded soldiers off of the battlefield and he was wounded and he...he, I think, won the Silver Star medal for his bravery. But he, he goes on to become a very prominent businessman I mean, and during his stay here in Jackson, or his stay in Mississippi, the, some of these, particularly the Mississippi Economic Council, took advantage of him to take him and haul him around the state to be a spokesman, to show you how you can go from being a bad guy to being a...a highly esteemed businessman, but that's the sort of world we live in today. But going back to what happened to the Freedom Riders though, is this what was the big twist and which was unknown when they arrived...when they were, they were first just put in the Jackson, in Jackson jail and then also they put in the Hinds County...I mean the prison which was then located in—on—the top floor—top two floors—of the, of what now is the Civil—Criminal—Courts Building down on, on Pearl Street. But the, when, when they started, the Freedom Riders started coming in in great numbers and they ran out of space for them. They decided to send, send these, the Riders up to Parchman Penitentiary, mind you, I mean, in the black of night they put 'em in, in vans and take 'em up to Parchman and put 'em in the maximum security unit and, which was, they were in...death row up there. Ross

Barnett was trying to be true to his word in this instance, anyway, that they not be harmed, but of course when they were in the hand, in the merciful hands of the, of these toughest guards in the prison, who were in the, in the maximum security unit, they, they...did everything that would be harmful, I mean like they would hose them down and then would hose them and put on—there was no air conditioning—but they would put these fans blowing air on them so they would, they would sort of chill them while they were still wet, you know I mean, and then the other thing is they'd take away their little, thin mattresses, that was a part, because the Freedom Riders all began this barrage of, of songs they kept making up, freedom songs and they would, they would pick up on some theme and then make a song from it, you know and this just drove all these guards wild up there and so they, they would try to do something to, to make them—harm them—without...breaking the skin, that was, that was sort of the turning point. But what the, the theme of the Riders became “jail but not bail” in other words, they insisted on not paying bail money to be bailed out. They went right up to the limit of their, their sentences and, and then that's when they would get out, at, at the end of the sentence. And what is, I remember so well, is that they would stay 40 days you see at Parchman, or they would come out on their 40th day. I just think in the, in the maximum security unit, I mean you're cut off from all outside information, I mean newspapers of course, not even television, but you're cut off from all information and you don't know what's going on in the country or the world at all. And you would think, you know, a person who's sorta, who's been shut up like that would...lose his mental sharpness if he had any. What I remember quite well is James Farmer, who was actually the, had been the founder of, of CORE, which is the group who really started the Freedom Riders. And he held, when he got out, he had a little news conference on Farish Street and it just impressed me so much that his mind was just as clear as it could be and he, and he spoke with a, he had this deep, resonant voice and he, he spoke in complete sentences you know about, and he, he was just an exceptional guy, he died just a few years after that, as a matter of fact, he didn't live to be an old person but he was the, he had been the organizer of it.

But the movement, I mean, the Freedom Riders had their place in the whole spectrum of the, of the Civil Rights movement, I mean, you see to begin with, what they were doing is they were challenging segregated waiting rooms which actually had already been ruled unconstitutional, but were not, they're not abiding by the, by the law in, in these states like Mississippi, you see, and so after, this went on for several months, Bobby Kennedy who was then Attorney General decided well we have to do something else to make sure that these, that these bus stations and these terminals take down these for “White Only” or “Black Only” signs and so they went after the, the...the Transportation Commission and got them to issue an order that, that these...bus companies or train companies or whatever would lose their license if they didn't take down the signs so bam, they took down the signs.

I have, I still have a photograph, as a matter of fact, of the...at the Trailways bus station here, the sign they had, it was standing, it was standing right outside the waiting area it said "Colored Waiting Room" pointing to the, to the, where the Blacks were supposed to go.

So, I mean this is the kind of world we...lived through and, I mean these were, I mean, of course these segregation barriers were, were doomed, I mean anybody with any objectivity or facing reality would know that they were doomed and were not gonna last, but there were, you had like the White Citizens Council preaching, "We're going to maintain," as they would, they said "legal segregation" and it had been already, like Brown v. Board of Education school decision had already been handed down and, and other decisions. So I mean, anyone who was a realist back then knew that there was no such thing as legal segregation...but that's just part of the whole story.

But what took place after that 1961, there were more, the violent years didn't begin until another couple years, I mean you have to remember this is 1961, 1962 and, and when James Meredith is, wins his court orders to be enrolled at Ole Miss and, and Ross Barnett who was the governor takes the position that he's going to massively resist desegregating Ole Miss by just admitting one Black student to the University, well of course now it's a matter of history that this triggered a riot on the campus that night of October 30, 1962 and to...October 1 of '60...and finally took 25,000 soldiers to be sent in to, to put down the riot on the campus, I mean, this is a terrible black mark that stays on Mississippi's record and should be on the conscience of everyone in the state.

DAWSON: I had a question. You said you worked for the Times-Picayune?

MINOR: Right. For 31 years, with I had, yeah.

DAWSON: Several of, we had I think is was seven or either eight Freedom Riders talk to us, and about half of them mentioned a family in New Orleans called the Castle family. And they said it like you should know the Castle family the way people know George Washington. So I was wondering if you were familiar with that name or if you had come, you know, in your dealings over the years had anybody mentioned them?

MINOR: Now how is this name spelled, do you have?

DAWSON: I assume just C-A-S-T-L-E but they said that when they left Jackson and would go to New Orleans that, they were staying with the Castle family...

MINOR: Well they would take them with them.

DAWSON: ...and that the Castle family would, they worked with CORE and I was wondering if you had heard anything about that family.

MINOR: That name doesn't strike a bell with me, I don't know. You see they were not, when they finally got to New Orleans they were not well treated, when they came in on the airplane they were...spit upon and treated very badly. Even in, New Orleans was no shining light of, I mean there was, they desegregated...desegregation of schools in New Orleans was accompanied by violence too, you know. The big difference was in New Orleans, the Catholic schools were...very prominent in those days and the Catholic schools probably had more students than the public schools did. And, the archbishop, he just ordered the Catholic schools to be integrated and as a result of that, there was this famous episode where this powerful dictator...who, from Saint Bernard and Plaquemines Parish named Leander Perez, who was a big Dixiecrat and also, he was also a very close ally of Senator James O. Eastland who would go spend time with him down there. But anyway, Leander Perez confronts the archbishop. The archbishop lived at the Notre Dame seminary in New Orleans on Carrollton Avenue and anyway Perez...catches him in the, walking one day in the, in the garden and confronts him and challenges him about desegregating the Catholic schools and as a result of that, the archbishop had him excommunicated, Leander Perez and I mean, it was well known that he was excommunicated. But the end of the—I have to tell you—the end of that story, because it was told to me by none other than James O. Eastland himself. When Leander Perez died he, his body was brought into Saint Joseph's Catholic Church, he was buried in the Catholic Church and everybody was wondering, "What's going on here?" I mean, "He'd been excommunicated." Eastland tells me how...his excommunication had been lifted, he said that, as I told you, they, he, Perez and Eastland were big buddies, you see, and...Perez—I mean Eastland—wanted to help him...get his excommunication lifted and so Eastland tells me this, he calls in the, in Washington, Eastland is the Chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee which is a very powerful committee you see, and which oversees the immigrants and visas and things like that, and he calls in the Papal delegate and his highest ranking people and pulls the record out, he said "All these people here are overstayed their visas and, and I'm gonna see that they're all deported." So the, the Papal delegate said, "Well, Senator, well what could we do?" And so that's when he tells him that, "Well look, if you, you lift the excommunication of my friend Leander Perez and you'll be, you'll be able to stay." So they got word to the Vatican, they lifted the excommunication and...

DAWSON: Wow!

MINOR: You wanna know about inside politics, I mean, see that was not known, except Eastland and I, one time were on a little...a little plane, we had gone somewhere and he had given me a ride on it, on some, somebody's private

plane that took us back to Jackson and so he tells me this story, he, for some reason or another he, he would, he would tell me all these little inside stories. Incidentally, on the Freedom Riders going back to that, Eastland had turned up with an intermediary, with, with Ross Barnett to get him to promise to protect the...the Freedom Riders and Bobby Kennedy, who he had struck up a friendship with, with Eastland and Eastland gets, gets a hold of Barnett and gets him to provide protection. I mean, otherwise, like that day when...when the Freedom Riders were being loaded on the bus, and there were Jackson police just all up and down several blocks to keep every, anybody, outsiders, you know, away from the, I mean to keep, make sure there'd be no attacking the...the Freedom Riders, I mean, they would've, you know, the Freedom Riders, as a matter of fact, they were dreading coming into Mississippi more than they were any other state because they knew Mississippi had a reputation for being the meanest and most segregated state of all, so, so this was the surprise they got. But the other surprise conversely was putting them in Parchman. I mean...we've had...this is, many struggles they were to be able to establish the right of Black people to...have their civil rights.

DAWSON: Anything else you'd like to share about the Freedom Riders?

MINOR: Well no, the wisdom of it originally was I, I, question, as to the way it turned out, I mean, it turned out to be a very...important factor in the whole picture. It didn't, it didn't change, I mean, it didn't need, they came in to desegregate these waiting rooms, well actually the law had already done that, but it was not being enforced. It was just and, but, so I mean, there was an accomplished fact, I mean and it, in just a matter of a few years, I mean you would, there was, there was no such thing as segregated waiting rooms and, and terminals and I mean this applied not only in the bus terminals but the railroad stations and also the airport. But, well that...I, I don't believe there's any particular thing I would like to add right now.

DAWSON: Okay. Well, we very much appreciate your time.

MINOR: Thank you.

DAWSON: And for the many years of integrity that you brought to the press in Mississippi, that is truly appreciated and that's gonna part of your legacy.

MINOR: Thank you, dear.

DAWSON: Your honesty. Thank you. Okay.

END OF RECORDING

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