

An Interview With
John Weems

Interviewed by
Tricia Freeman

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Interviewee: John S. Weems
Interviewer: Tricia Freeman

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Scope Note: Murrah High School students, with assistance from the
Mississippi Department of Archives and History,
conducted oral history interviews with local citizens
involved in the Jackson Public Schools integration. The
interviews were conducted in the spring of 1978 by the
eleventh grade advanced history class led by Diane
Canterbury.

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FREEMAN: I'm Tricia Freeman and I'm interviewing Mr. John Weems who is presently working with the Student Council of Mississippi. Mr. Weems, how long had you been teaching when integration came?

WEEMS: Tricia, I started teaching at Central High School in 1944 so I had been there a good while when we first had integration.

FREEMAN: Where were you teaching at the time?

WEEMS: I was teaching at Central.

FREEMAN: How did you feel about the issues of desegregation?

WEEMS: Well, I felt it was the law of the land and the Jackson Public Schools was going to abide by this law and I felt that it would be something a little different for those of us at Central High School at the time as well as for the new students that would be coming into this school.

FREEMAN: Did the students mix well with each other?

WEEMS: I don't think they did at first. I think there was a strain on the part of both races because it was something that was different. Each race had been used to its own separate school system.

FREEMAN: How did it affect the faculty?

WEEMS: I think the same is true about the faculty.

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I was pleased at Central when the faculty was integrated in that the teachers at Central, I think, very graciously accepted the new staff members, and I think for the most part the new teachers that came into our faculty at Central High School felt that they were accepted. We had a very good relationship, I think, and in the years that followed.

FREEMAN: You said that the students mixed well. Was there any violence at first?

WEEMS: We had very little difficulty in our school all through the years between the races.

FREEMAN: Was there any interference from parents?

WEEMS: I think there was very little, if any. Of course, as you know, in the Jackson Public Schools as a whole that after _____ that many students left the public schools and went into private schools.

FREEMAN: How do you feel about private schools and the teachers that teach in them?

WEEMS: Well, I think there's a place for all kinds of schools. Of course, as you know, we have many public, private and parochial schools and I have worked with teachers, administrators, and students in all three types of schools in my state Student Council work and I think there's a place for all types of schools in our community and I find that the people that I know in the different types of schools to be very dedicated, and I have many friends who teach in the different kinds of schools.

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FREEMAN: Did you ever think about leaving the Jackson Public School system and working in a private school?

WEEMS: The only time that I began thinking about leaving the public schools was near the time that I made the decision to retire. I had taught at Central High School for thirty three years, had never been moved to another school and when the legislature passed the bill to lower the teacher's retirement to thirty years of experience regardless of your age and when I found out that Central High School was going to be closed permanently, this is when I made my decision to retire and another reason I made this decision was that I had been executive secretary of the Mississippi Association of Student Council for a number of years and I felt that this would give me an opportunity to devote more time to this particular responsibility and I have enjoyed my work with the public, private and parochial schools in the state and I've had an opportunity to work with the leaders and their advisors and this is a very rewarding experience for me.

FREEMAN: In conclusion, having had a few years of observation, in your opinion how has desegregation affected the JPS, for better or worse?

WEEMS: I think it was unfortunate that we lost so many of our students at the beginning and I think this is something that we've had a hard time recovering from. I would like to say that in 1969-70, when we had the massive integration, that the presidents of the student bodies of the

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different high schools, I felt, contributed a great deal to keeping the public schools as stable as they could be at that particular time. I feel that it has been a difficult period in the history of the Jackson Public Schools. I know that we have good schools and hopefully they will become even better. I think that under the leadership of our present superintendent, Dr. Fortenberry, that the future of the Jackson Public Schools is bright.

FREEMAN: Why do you think that desegregation ran smoother in the south than it did in the north?

WEEMS: I think it ran smoother in the south because the southern people were determined to abide by the law, and I feel that they made every effort to do this.

FREEMAN: Now can you tell me a little about yourself and what you do now?

WEEMS: As I mentioned earlier I'm working with the state Student Council organization and this year I have had an added responsibility. I have been working as the field consultant for the National Association of Secondary School Principals. I have been visiting principals throughout the state and trying to increase membership in the national principals' organization as well as the state principals' organization and I stay rather busy and I have had a chance to visit with friends and with students that I have known in the different public schools and I do keep a close contact with education.

FREEMAN: Thank you, Mr. Weems.

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