

An Interview with

Alta May Power

November 19, 1978

Interviewed by

Nancy Roberts

MISSISSIPPI DEPARTMENT OF ARCHIVES AND HISTORY  
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Interviewee: Power, Alta May  
Interviewer: Roberts, Nancy

Title: An interview with Alta May Power, November 19, 1978 /  
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Collection Title: Murrah High School Advanced History Class Oral History  
Project, Politics and Integration

Scope Note: Murrah High School students, with assistance from the  
Mississippi Department of Archives and History, conducted oral  
history interviews with local citizens about local politics and the  
Jackson Public Schools integration. The interviews were  
conducted during the 1978-1979 school year.

This collection was selected to be digitally remastered through  
the National Endowment for the Humanities Civil Rights Era  
Recordings Grant in 2004.

### Part 1

ROBERTS: My name is Nancy Roberts and I'm talking with Ms. Alta May Power, who was Principal at Boyd Elementary School during the time of the court-ordered desegregation of Jackson Public Schools in 1969. Ms. Power, were you given any advice or counseling prior to the change that anticipated problems and helped you to resolve them?

POWER: Yes, Nancy. For several years prior to integration, many administrators, principals, and our teacher groups met to discuss anticipated problems and seek solutions. At one time, a national research and educational counseling agency came to Jackson to spend several weeks advising various groups and individuals on integration problems and possible solutions.

ROBERTS: Did staff members exhibit a willingness to work together?

POWER: Yes, unusually well, I felt. Teachers who felt they could not work in this situation had resigned. Therefore, those left were ready to work well together.

ROBERTS: Did any express apprehension? If so, about what?

POWER: Several did, but only privately to the principal and possibly probably to each other. I think this was due, generally, because this was the big change of a lifestyle. Each of us has apprehensions upon entering a new phase of undertaking – entering the unknown, so to speak. At Boyd, the blacks were more apprehensive, I believe, because they had left their school and had to adapt to completely new surroundings, and possibly new methods. They may have expected some hostility. However, I am happy to say that no such feelings were exhibited.

The Boyd white teachers were most welcoming and helpful to the newcomers, I think. We had determined among ourselves to accept the new situation gracefully beforehand.

ROBERTS: Did staff members appear to be open with each other in discussing problems?

POWER: Yes. I was pleased with the discussion and cooperation on the part of all teachers.

ROBERTS: Did the changeover require changes in teaching assignments and responsibilities? If so, what was the reason – reasoning behind it?

POWER: The changeover necessarily required changes in teaching assignments and

responsibilities. Since half of our faculty was replaced, those new teachers coming in had to be assigned to fill-in the vacancies. It was attempted, however, to assign the new ones to jobs they wanted and/or were best suited.

ROBERTS: How did the pupils react to having teachers of the opposite race? Were there problems?

POWER: The pupils reacted very well, I thought, because they were well-prepared by their parents. Yes, there were some problems, but not so unusual, nor insurmountable.

ROBERTS: Did the integration of pupils affect the level of pupil academic achievement?

POWER: I do think, for the most part, the black pupils found more was expected of them than accustomed. Boyd had the reputation of being a hard school academically, or maybe they were just over-awed with their new surroundings.

ROBERTS: Were school academic standards or grading systems changed? If so, how?

POWER: We tried not to change the grading system, nor our standards, that first year. Our second year brought on some necessary changes, because we went from a one-through-sixth grade school to a first and second grade school that second year, and that change caused a lot of adjustment and problems.

ROBERTS: Did the change affect the patron support? If so, in what way?

POWER: Yes, it did. Boyd patrons left in droves to enter their children in private schools. Overnight, we went from about a ninety percent white to a – a little over fifty percent. Those remaining supported integration for the most part, and were very cooperative.

ROBERTS: Did staff relationships grow or weaken during that first year? Did black teachers express a desire to transfer back to their former schools? If so, did they give reasons?

POWER: Seemingly, our relationships grew. However, most of the blacks asked to transfer back to their old schools for reasons of being near to home and so forth.

ROBERTS: Did any of your former teachers ask to return to Boyd? Did they give reasons?

POWER: Yes, all of the former teachers asked to return to Boyd, expressing, I think,

the same reasons – it's nearest to home, family situations, and so forth.

ROBERTS: Thank you, Ms. Power.

## Part 2

ROBERTS: . . . the court-ordered desegregation of Jackson Public Schools in 1969. Ms. Power, were you given any advice or counseling prior to the change that anticipated problems and helped you to resolve them?

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ROBERTS: If so, about what?

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ROBERTS: Thank you, Ms. Power.

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