

An Interview with
ROBERT L. T. SMITH
August 20, 1980

Interviewed by
John Dittmer
John Jones

Mississippi Department of Archives and History
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JONES: This John Jones with the Mississippi Department of Archives and History, and I'm about to interview Reverend Robert L. T. Smith. With me today is John Dittmer from Tougaloo College, who we'll hear more from in later interviews hopefully. Today is Wednesday, August 20, 1980. We're at the Archives Building in Jackson. Reverend Smith, I thought we could start by your giving us some of your early background, when and where you were born.

SMITH: I was born in Hinds County, the southwest corner of Hinds County. At that time they had a little country post office: Duke, D-U-K-E. Of course, it was a common thing then that all over the state there were stores several miles apart throughout the rural areas, and most of them had a little post office in the store there.

JONES: What did your father do?

SMITH: He lived there where I was born. He was a farmer.

JONES: Did you start school down in that part of the county?

SMITH: Yes, I did.

JONES: Is that where you went to high school?

SMITH: Well, we didn't have any high schools for blacks at that time, nowhere in that area.

JONES: What year were you born?

SMITH: 1902.

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JONES: Tell me when you had the first indication that you wanted to go into the ministry.

SMITH: Well, I was about thirty-one years old, something like that.

JONES: What did you do prior to the time you became a minister?

SMITH: I'm still a minister, but the whole time that I have been a minister I've had other occupations. Oh yes, I was born on a farm, and we did the best we could trying to scratch out a living out there until I was about eighteen or nineteen, and then I came to town.

JONES: What do you remember of the racial atmosphere and the conditions when you were growing up?

SMITH: It just so happens that that was just a little bit better than a generation, not quite two generations from chattel slavery, and a lot of the slave masters and the former slaves all lived in the same general area. The old relationship of master and slave, it was pretty well evident in the community.

JONES: Was the land where you grew up mostly owned by large landholders, white?

SMITH: Well, in our particular area around there it was poor and there weren't any large landholders in the sense of thousands of acres, no. There may have been one or two every now and then. Well, a good many blacks had acquired land, small tracts of land in that area, and the whites, most of them had a little larger tracts. But there were no great big plantations around us.

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JONES: I'm trying to place you. What town exists now near where you grew up?

SMITH: Well, Utica was the town. The railroad still goes through there. Yes, it was the town. The mail would come to Utica and go out on rural routes to those various little post offices like Cayuga and Duke and, I can't remember all of them. So Utica was really the town.

JONES: Okay, I was just trying to place you. Do you remember when you were coming up talking to anybody who was a former slave?

SMITH: Oh, yes. They were all around that area.

JONES: Do you remember any of the stories that they told you? Would they picture slavery as a brutal thing?

SMITH: Oh, yes. My God, yes, man. That's a lie that I hate to hear told. I've heard it said that it had some kind of compassion in it. Slavery itself was brutal! The former slaves, I don't know how many, all of the older people in my time - by older people I mean people old enough to be my grandfather or grandmother - they had been slaves, and those who would talk to you about it, yes, they'd be frank with you. It was terrible. It was terrible. It might be worth mentioning or taking into consideration that the hangover from slavery made the former slaves, a large number of them, I don't know percentage-wise, I dare say almost fifty percent of them were hesitant through fear or some other reason to discuss

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with you the horrors of slavery. Somehow some of them weren't too sure that freedom from slavery was going to stick, and they didn't want to antagonize their former slavemasters or children for fear that they would be penalized when they were re-enslaved or re-subjuated. So you couldn't get every former slave to relate to you the conditions as they actually were. But for those who would talk, slavery was terrible.

JONES: Well, indeed at that time in Mississippi there was an atmosphere that was almost as repressive as slavery was.

SMITH: Not only at that time, it's come on down through the years. Oh, my God, yeah man. Now we had a meeting at the courthouse in Raymond this year. Raymond was our courthouse. Hinds County has two judicial districts; one courthouse is in Raymond and the other is in Jackson. Of course, my father and grandfather and on back through there all paid taxes in Raymond. But the meeting this year in Raymond was the first time that I ever went inside of the courtroom and the Raymond Courthouse as a free man. My first time to go and sit where you want, if you want a drink of water you get it, if you want to use the toilet, it's there.

DITTMER: Do you think the recent elections have had something to do with that in terms of Mr. Smith and Mr. Thompson and the Board of Supervisors and other things and other elections that were held, or was it something that they finally just gave up on?

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SMITH: Well, yes, certainly that has helped a whole lot. But we had to travel down that road and get the thing in shape where these men could be elected. I was dealing with that period back there before we got to them.

DITTMER: Yes.

SMITH: I believe we were discussing moving out of slavery into semi-slavery, and semi-slavery diminishing on down to the point where it is, or where we want to say it's over. I'm not too sure it's over. Well, that would require more of an explanation than I am maybe able to give. I'm going to get way off on that. I was thinking in the economic field, but no need of me getting on that because we'd be here all day and I wouldn't be able to unravel it. Maybe I'd tangle it up more than I'd unravel it. But the hangover from slavery is with us in more than one area now. The crucial area is in the economic field.

JONES: We'll talk about that more as we get farther into the chronology of your life. I wanted to know if you could remember the first you met with a group of people to discuss the matter of civil rights. Was that in the '50s or earlier?

SMITH: No, that was earlier. Hm, let's see. It must've been around the year 1925. It must have been.

JONES: Down in Duke community?

SMITH: No, no, that was here in Jackson.

JONES: What type of meeting was it?

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SMITH: Well, it was some three, four or five men meeting to try to see what we could do, what could be done. Of course from that time on we met and met and met and met to try to determine what could be done.

JONES: Were these men connected with the NAACP?

SMITH: Yes, they were. In fact, all of these men were. As frightening as things were and as much fear as there was prior to 1925, and following that too, it was actually dangerous for two or three blacks to be discussing voting and how you were going to become a registered voter and participate in the elections of office. That amounted to almost a treason in this area.

JONES: And were you able to accomplish anything?

SMITH: Yes. We didn't accomplish much, but we took the blaze, the torch, and kept the desire for freedom burning, we kept that burning.

JONES: Did you meet regularly throughout the '30s and '40s?

SMITH: Yes, well, most of us who were meeting were working for the post office. Some of them were mail carriers. Some of them were railway mail clerks. Some of them were mail handlers around post offices. Of course, we'd come in contact with one another. There was a certain kind of immunity; that is local police, sheriff, you know, wouldn't come on federal property to arrest you. They'd have to catch you away from there. So we had the chance to discuss it often, and we did discuss it often.

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DITTMER: Did you consider yourself a Republican then by party politics?

SMITH: Well, yes. We didn't know anything else to aspire to at that time. I don't want to get too far off on this other thing. I'd like to follow your line of questioning. Well, since you raised the question. We had a little shadow Republican thing here. We didn't know any better. I was quite a young fellow at that time. Another young black, James A. White, and I, we were very much interested in trying to get some blacks registered so we could vote and help change things from that angle. In fact, the Republican Party had a shadow organization here in Mississippi and in most of the southern states at that time. The Executive Committee of the Republican Party met down on Farish Street upstairs over Redmond's Drug Store, and there must have been ten, there could've been twelve, men, blacks from across the state, and one white as far as I can recall at this time. There was one white. And Mr. White, the young black man, he and I had made an effort to get in touch with that Republican group for some considerable time. This was after 1925. It might have been - I don't know, but it was after that. It must have been close to 1930, somewhere along in there. But anyway, we went down to the place of the meeting and waited outside and knocked. We waited I don't know how long, but somebody finally came to the door and told us to come on in. Well, there was little difference in the way they treated us and the way the people at the Jackson or

Raymond courthouse would've treated us, even though all of them were black except for one. They wanted to know what was bothering us, or something to that effect, and they told us to make it short. We made it as short as we could, and told them that we wanted to get blacks registered across the state, and that they had certain leverage, representing the Republican Party - they recommended post masters and marshalls and so on - and through that leverage we believed we could get certain blacks registered. Both of us made our talk. Nobody made any comment at all. Finally, when we'd finished our say - I doubt it took over five minutes for both of us to say what we said - somebody said, "That's all, boys, okay," and some man swung the door open wide and we walked on out the door. Going out the door, an elderly man, almost old enough to be our grandfather, he hunched us with his knee. Some of the men in the room coughed. We were tempted to maybe show our resentment, but we didn't do anything. We went on out. That was what was called the Republican Party at that time. It was just a joke, nothing but a joke.

DITTMER: That's very interesting because I had heard that in those days the Republican Party in Mississippi and other states was mainly interested in patronage and in the convention every four years, in going to the convention and not really developing a broad-based party, and what you say seems to indicate that was true.

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SMITH: The man - I'd never met him but I'd heard of him, I have not seen him since - was named Perry Howard. He was a lawyer, had offices in Washington. I understand he came down because his home was down here, and he'd come down every year or two. But every four years they would have a notice in the papers, if I remember correctly, about the Republican precinct caucuses or precinct meeting and all that kind of thing, and that the party convention would be held at such and such a place. Well, all of that was printed and tacked on bulletin boards. I don't know whether I saw it in newspapers or not. It might have been the real thing, but it was nothing but a joke. You had Republican big-wigs, if you call them that, in the North and Midwest, they just had all of these votes in their pocket, and they did nominate whoever they wanted to nominate. They had the votes from this shadow organization in their pocket. It's a shame, but that's the way it was. When we found out, Mr. White, this man's passed on, and I - when we found out - and we had a small following, of course - what the Republican Party was here, we were through with it. That whetted our appetite to try to get into the Democratic Party.

DITTMER: Really? Back that far?

SMITH: Oh, yes, way back there.

DITTMER: Were you a supporter of Franklin Roosevelt?

SMITH: Oh, yes. We were able to vote by that time, for Roosevelt. By that time there was a handful of us that could vote. Oh, yes. One of the greatest presidents America has had.

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DITTMER: Yes.

JONES: So you were able to gain some concession from the white power structure in that some of you all were granted suffrage.

SMITH: Oh, yes. People, whether they're white or black, they react pretty well the same way. Nobody wants to be a slave. Nobody wants to be abused. Now, when I was going to school, public schools here, what they gave us as history wasn't anything but a lot of propaganda. You know, they would tell how nice the mistresses were to the slaves, doing this for the slave children, and all that kind of thing. It gave us the picture that everything was just so nice to be slave, and that the slaves were treated in such a nice way, which was not true. There were all kinds of insurrections, all kinds of rebellions, but that was suppressed. It never got out of the neighborhoods as far as publicity was concerned. So all through the period I can remember we've always wanted to be free. We've wanted to register and vote and participate. Our big problem back there was with the Justices of the Peace and constables. It didn't make a lot of difference who the governor was, all our troubles were with the constable, the deputy sheriff down there. We wanted to qualify to vote so that we could determine who was going to be the Justice of the Peace, who was going to be the constable there in our district. That was the constant effort. So many were run off to Chicago or anywhere away from here if they tried to register and kept on trying to do it that

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gave them an excuse to run you away. But that didn't stamp out the idea. Those who remained were still trying to figure some way, somehow that we will finally be able to register to vote.

JONES: Do you remember the first year you voted?

SMITH: Yes.

JONES: What year?

SMITH: Well, I remember the first year I tried to vote, put it that way. Let me see, I think I started trying when I was twenty-one it was quite a long, drawn-out thing. Right now here in Jackson the post office now stands on the corner of Capitol and West. The county courthouse was right behind the post office on the corner of West and Pearl. I was a mail carrier and we made two trips a day. We'd get back in from the first trip about 1:00 or something, and as soon as I'd come in off the route, before I'd go eat my dinner, I'd go straight over to the courthouse and try to register. That process was followed there for, oh, several months. It was awfully disgusting. But the group I was telling you about, we met then, of course. I received encouragement from them and I needed it because of the way I was treated at the circuit clerk's office and the courthouse. Finally I was registered. Then we knew that the general election that came about in November was nothing but a joke, all of the issues had been decided in the Democratic primaries. It didn't mean a thing at that time. We knew we had to get in

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the Democratic primary if our votes were going to count for anything. But we were turned down and turned down and turned down. But we'd go everytime they had a primary election. I'd be at my precinct and a few of the others would be at theirs. So we tried and tried and tried until, I don't remember the year but the courts made a decision there that they had to let us vote in the Democratic primary. That's the only time our vote really ever counted for anything. We'd been trying all along.

DITTMER: I believe that was 1944, wasn't it?

SMITH: I don't remember.

DITTMER: The Bilbo election, the one right after that, for the Senate, was that the one you were able to vote in?

SMITH: I don't remember all of those details right off.

DITTMER: Yes. I was wondering because that's one of the things we have known at Tougaloo, that a number of people were active in the effort to have Senator Bilbo removed, or not seated during that time.

SMITH: Oh, yes.

DITTMER: It was because he was saying things like: "You know how to keep a Negro from voting?" I was wondering if you were part of that effort there.

SMITH: Oh, yes, I was part of it. From the time I was a grown man I've been a part of everything. Not any insurrections, I don't believe in tearing and burning the house down. I still

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don't believe in that. I think the American system is a good system, and by American system I mean the constitution of the United States. I don't see anything wrong with it. If there's anything wrong with it then we can amend it. I still want to work within the framework of the United States, of the constitution of the United States. Even though our course was way off back yonder, in a sense it's way off right now, since we know that there's nothing perfect that man devises, that it has some imperfection in it, I think we ought to work within the system. But you have to work and work hard. Well, recent events maybe prove that that's not a bad philosophy. We've been able to bring about certain changes that were helpful, and we hope to bring about others.

JONES: Have you always been able to vote in Mississippi?

SMITH: No.

JONES: When were you disqualified?

SMITH: Well, the very fact that you were born black disqualified you at the time I was born.

JONES: Right.

SMITH: Well, I registered, it must have been along about the year '23, something along in there. I tried to vote in every election, everytime. Since I lived in the city everytime there was a city election or any kind I tried to vote. But it was all - you had no Republican primary, you had no Republican primary. I tried to vote every time there was any kind of election,

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but I was not able to vote until the Supreme Court ruled that they had to let us vote in the Democratic primary.

JONES: And John said that was in 1944.

DITTMER: Yes.

SMITH: It might have been. I don't remember right off; whenever it was.

JONES: After the Brown decision in 1954, were you still able to vote in Mississippi?

SMITH: What is the Brown decision?

JONES: When they ruled that separate but equal was illegal; Brown versus the Topeka, Kansas Board of Schools.

SMITH: Oh, we could vote in small numbers afterwards, we were voting in small numbers. It was a question of breaking the ice here and breaking the ice yonder. We blacks really didn't vote in a meaningful way until the Voting Rights Bill passed the Congress. I'm sure you already have all kinds of records on that, or should have them, about brutality in almost all the counties here in the state against blacks who tried to register. So much violence. So many threats. It didn't necessarily mean that black citizens were cowards, but you have a wife, children, whoever is there, and when some violence comes against you against voting or sassing the white man or something like that, you have no sheriff, you have nobody to go to. Well, this is kind of far-fetched, but I ran for the Con-

gress one year, and that was prior to the effort; in fact, that was part of the effort to get the Voting Rights Bill through the Congress. I went down in Jefferson County, and blacks were frightened, and other counties in this congressional district, they were frightened. They were afraid to talk to you when they would find out who I was. They didn't want the white people to see them talking to you. But I found one black in Fayette, he was in his cafe, and he couldn't run from me and he didn't want to run me out of there. In talking to him I had some handbills, and I asked him, "I know you wouldn't want to put them up on the wall there. May I lay them on the counter? Would you just let me leave a few of them here?" He said, "Well, yeah. You just put them on the edge of the counter somewhere over there." I went from there on to Natchez. Anyway, coming back through there - no, I didn't come back through there that same day, I went another way. But two days later when I did go back through there going to Natchez, or somewhere in that general area in the fourth congressional district, I talked to this man about it. He said, "Yeah, the sheriff," whatever the sheriff's name was, "he came right on in here shortly after you left." I didn't know that, "And he was bragging on you, said you were perfectly right, and said you were just too good a man for somebody to slip around and kill you," or something to that effect. "And he said you had every right to leave them

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handbills here," he said, "and I had every right to keep them here, but the real danger of it is that some of these scoundrels would make out like something happened on the other end of the county and would call him out there after midnight and he and all his deputies would be rushing out there, and he said, 'here you are and all your building here, and nobody here to protect you.'" I'm sorry. That's far off from what you were talking about.

DITTMER: I don't know where we are now, but I'm just fascinated with that whole 1962 campaign you ran. I read where you were the first black to run for Congress since Reconstruction, and at that time what I know of: the violence, intimidation; you know, just going into Natchez running in a campaign was an act of tremendous courage. What really motivated you to run for Congress in 1962, knowing you couldn't win?

SMITH: No, we did win. We didn't win that seat, but it aroused the conscience of some - we've always had some decent white people here in Mississippi, and it aroused them to speak out. If they spoke out they ran the same risk of violence, maybe not death, but they bombed houses and automobiles. So it aroused the conscience of a lot of people. Even during the campaign I was called before the House Judiciary Committee in Washington several times while they were considering various voter registration bills that had been introduced in the Congress. That was just one instance. There were others all across the South that were doing the same thing, a similar thing. But it

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aroused the consciousness of the President and the Attorney General and a lot of friends who got behind that bill wholeheartedly, and they came out of there with a bill that the President signed. Yes, the President signed it. So it wasn't as foolhardy as it might have appeared. That was the one side of it. The other side of it was that I submitted - I knew it. I knew there were two or three carloads of mobsters, of them behind me while I was traveling. But I just said, "Well, if they don't bother me, I won't bother them. I'll just go ahead." I thought if they were there and would hear what I had to say I might convert one or two of them. Oh, yes. We're born to die, everybody's born to die. I don't know. I could have died back there when I was twenty years old, and I just say that all of this time the Lord just spared me. The Lord has spared me this time.

DITTMER: Well, you've said that you had Klansmen following you. What was the attitude of the local law enforcement people, the local peace officers?

SMITH: Most of them went the other way. Wherever I had an opportunity to talk with local law enforcement people I just talked to them with good sense. I didn't lie. I didn't go to them in any braggadocio way. I would just be perfectly frank with them, and I don't recall a single instance - I'd hear what they'd tell somebody else. Of course, I didn't talk with that many. But in talking with them, most of them thought the thing was

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reasonable. All I was crying out then for was, "Get the vote!" I thought it was right then and I know it's right now.

DITTMER: Well, I don't want to say you were ahead of your time, but you were certainly ahead of the rest of us when it came to taking political office.

SMITH: Yes. Well, I keep stressing it that when I say the American system I mean the government setup as we have it under the Constitution of the United States.

JONES: John asked you what motivated you to run for office. What people were behind you, what organizations if any?

SMITH: Well, Mr. Medgar Evers and my son Robert L. T. Smith, Jr., and Dr. A. B. Britton, Mr. V. R. Collier. I'm leaving out some names because I can't think of all of them. It wasn't a huge number, but it was a goodly, it was a nice group of them. And a young white lawyer, William Higgs. Later on Ed King joined in with us. You know Ed I'm sure.

DITTMER: Yes.

SMITH: And, good gracious, I just don't want it to be on the record I couldn't call his name. Well, let's cut it off and I'll remember. Oh, Dr. Beittel, yes. Well, now, he wasn't in on the beginning of it, but when he found out - I say he wasn't in on the beginning of it, but he just might have been - But when he found out about it he gave it his whole-hearted support.

There was another black, he came from Vicksburg, what was his name? He hasn't been dead fourteen years, if you've been there fourteen years. Well, I don't know. I can't call his name. He was on the staff there. We had a few from across the state. Mr. James Gilliam of Clarksdale. There were others scattered around here and yonder. So it wasn't as foolhardy as it might have appeared. But I still think that was a move that should've been taken.

JONES: Did the NAACP give you much support?

SMITH: Well, it could not participate. Mr. Medgar Evers was the field director at that time, and he gave us all the support he could as an individual, but as an officer of the NAACP, no. He had a brilliant mind.

JONES: But I mean as an organization able to ...

SMITH: No, it wasn't able to as an organization.

JONES: I mean as an organization able to mount black support or to get the black community together behind a cause.

SMITH: Well, it did it like I mentioned about those railway mail clerks and those mail carriers, all of us were members of the NAACP, but our actions were not NAACP actions. They were motivated by the NAACP, but we did it individually. It was the same during the campaign.

DITTMER: Tell us about Medgar Evers and your relationship with him.

SMITH: Number one: he was as fine a man as I've ever known. He

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was about the same age as my oldest son, who I named a while ago. Somehow they'd met when they first came out of the army, and they had similar views on so many things, and particularly in the area of voting rights and civil rights. Of course, a field director for the NAACP was something new for us here in Mississippi, and Mr. Evers needed somebody to support him in every way, and, of course, my son filled right in that category along with just a very few others. Naturally I was involved from there on. He was as fine a young fellow as I've ever known; not a bully. He was dedicated to equality and justice for all. He wanted to work within the framework of the law, not mob rule or anything like that. We had an organization that we called the Jackson Movement. The Jackson Movement followed the congressional campaign. This movement was organized when we gained some momentum. By momentum I mean arousing blacks to want to register and vote and participate in government and become responsible citizens. The Jackson Movement was organized with members from various other organizations including the NAACP, including the Council of Federated Organizations. We were headquartered at Tougaloo at that time. And there were several other organizations I can't recall. Anyway, I was chosen as the Chairman of the Jackson Movement at that time. Mr. Evers would attend. We had mass rallies

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every night for a while. We had a whole lot of support from Tougaloo; practically all of it real good. And Riggs or Biggs, I don't know ...

DITTMER: Henry Briggs.

SMITH: Briggs, that's right, yes. Briggs was a young fellow. He was in on that. But anyway, Briggs would be there every night. Several of the faculty members of Tougaloo maybe didn't come every night like Briggs did, but they would come from time to time. Every now and then Dr. Beittel would come. In fact, we got great encouragement there. That was about the only white people that would openly show their hands with us. Anyhow, Mr. Medgar Evers, that gave him a platform to meet the people. He could come out and speak whenever he got ready, make certain announcements whenever he got ready. But we'd have somebody to speak almost every night. I would say Mr. Medgar Evers was the mainspring behind it, because the NAACP had access to certain lawyers, and at this particular time the Department of Justice in Washington had assigned certain lawyers to Mississippi. They had a - I don't know what they called it - a Mississippi Division, or Section, or whatever they called it, but Mr. John Doar was head of that section. I've got his telephone number somewhere. I never could understand why, if you were sitting right here and call, it would ring one time before it could ring the second time;

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"John Doar." I never have been able to understand that.

DITTMER: He was sitting there all the time waiting for your call.

SMITH: I don't know what the hookup was, I never did know, and I never would ask him. Mr. Doar's such a fine fellow. But anyhow, we had that kind of connection aside from the NAACP attorneys. They were available. We didn't have many of them. I don't think we had but one here in the beginning, Mr. Jess Brown. Later on, of course, we got Mr. Jack Young, and then came the Legal Defense Fund and we got more or them.

DITTMER: Yes.

SMITH: Here we have to back up a little bit. Here in the state of Mississippi, if a black was accused of any kind of thing, it didn't matter what it was, that involved another white person, it was hard to get an attorney to take your case. It was hard to get an attorney. Mr. Evers was always able to get an attorney under those conditions. That gave him wide influence and appeal in the black community. It's a little rough when you're accused of something and you don't have anybody. Maybe they've handcuffed you and put you in jail, and you don't have nobody to represent you in court. It's a pretty rough feeling. It's a pretty rough feeling. But Medgar Evers was then the mainspring behind the effort at that time. In fact, the night he was killed we met - well, we always met in churches. Every once in a while we'd meet at a lodge hall. We'd met in New

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Jerusalem Church over on Whitfield Street. Mr. Evers, well, very often he'd come in looking terribly worried. I happened to know some the things he had to check into; go into it, disguise yourself, run the risk of death to go and check it out. So it's natural that he would've looked worried a lot of times. But on the particular night he was assassinated, he looked terribly worried. He didn't stay there long. The man who was accused of assassinating him was sitting on the east side of the building, front bench near the end. He had a kind of a smile or grin or something on him. He'd been there before, every now and then he'd come in, and he was always grinning the whole time he was in there, but you could see it couldn't have been a sincere smile. It was a "front" kind of thing. This man was there for a while, and then he left. I never paid any attention. We'd had white folks before, every now and then by that time; not many, but you'd have one or two. Mr. Evers soon left, he didn't stay there long. He didn't address the meeting or anything that night. Anyhow, he was assassinated that night.

DITTMER: I had heard that the national NAACP was a little bit more conservative than Medgar Evers was in terms of the Jackson Movement, do you recall the national NAACP: Roy Wilkins, Gloster Current, when they came down did they attempt to put the damper on the demonstrations and to go into voter registration? What are your recollections of when the national office came down?

SMITH: Well, like I said a while ago: I am going to tell the truth, and I don't care what's published, so let's go ahead with it. No, neither one of them frowned on the efforts of the Jackson Movement. The fact of it is, we didn't know, I didn't know certainly, who the group wanted to choose as the chairman of the Jackson Movement. Mr. Gloster Current came down and conducted the election on the order of a primary. They had a meeting there. They were just organizing within the city. They came and notified me that I had been chosen and asked me whether I would serve. I told them yes. I did receive from Mr. Gloster Current word that Mr. Roy Wilkins was happy about the choice. I never discussed it with him. But no, they didn't frown on it at all. But, now this part is a little ticklish there too because of their support. I am not a coward. They are not cowards, but at that time they got a little support from blacks, but most of their support came from certain foundations funds and certain funds of various kinds. Those in charge of those foundations funds didn't want to fund anything that was too far out in left field. So I can understand why Mr. Wilkins and Mr. Current wouldn't want to openly be identified with it. But they were not enemies of the movement, I'll put it that way. Not at all. They were not enemies of the movement at all!

JONES: What were your personal sentiments about pressing the issue through the use of mass demonstrations in Jackson? What did

you think was the best road to take?

SMITH: Well, I always walked out in front when we had them here. I would walk out in front of the crowd, and sometimes it was a little rough. I remember one night we marched out of the Masonic Temple on Lynch Street - that was after Mr. Evers was assassinated, I don't remember what night - but we had a tremendous crowd that night. It's about three or four blocks from the Masonic Temple on Lynch Street down to the intersection of Terry Road and Lynch, and when we got down there they had the highway patrolmen and the city policemen everywhere. They had the whole intersection there blockaded. Oh, you know, they were rattling their guns as if they were ready to shoot. I didn't have sense enough to get scared. I reckon the Lord just held me there. They had somebody there telling me and telling everybody over the foghorn what to do and what not to do. We paused there for a good little bit, and somebody, I think it was Mr. Charles Evers was in the back down there and said to somebody and sent somebody up to me and said we had accomplished our purpose, and as dirty as they were they'd kill me and a whole lot of the folk there and we wouldn't have accomplished much. So we turned around, but we turned around in an orderly fashion. I turned around and addressed group, and we marched on back to the Temple in order and finished our meeting there. So, we had to demonstrate. We

had to demonstrate! You know, I just tell the truth whatever it is. I've always lived in the South and almost gotten run out of here, but I found out a long time ago that these bad bullies around here, they're bad all right as long as you can't hurt them, but when he finds out that if he messes with you that he's not going to know if one's going to get killed or both are going to get killed, it changes his mind right away.

JONES: I was going to ask you about that.

SMITH: Well, I'm telling you right now. That will change his mind right now. I found that out, and I know that today. But that's not the way; maybe for an individual, yes, that'll keep somebody from running over you, but for a mass movement like that, it won't work. That won't work because you've got to sway public opinion, and you're subject to the dictates of the law, whatever it might be, the courts and so on.

DITTMER: We're nearing the end of the hour ...

JONES: We can go on.

DITTMER: Okay. I've just got to ask you about Allen Thompson and negotiations with him during this period; the Mayor.

SMITH: All right, I told you I'd tell you the truth. I've known the Honorable Mr. Allen Thompson since he was a youngster. I used to see him out around his granddaddy's house out there where I delivered mail. In fact, I delivered his mail to his mother's house. Out of respect for the office of Mayor, I'll just say that he is a man full of untruths; I'll put it

that way. He handled the truth very, very carelessly, very carelessly. I told him that. I was explicit with him on that. It was an easy matter for him to tell it one way now and the opposite way a half-hour later.

DITTMER: Didn't at one point he circulate a rumor that there had been an agreement with the leadership of the Jackson Movement when in fact there had not been one? I remember reading at some point that he was capable of doing these kinds of things.

SMITH: As to the details I'd have to refresh my memory, but I do know that the Jackson Movement appointed a committee; it was four others and myself the chairman. I don't remember who they were right off. We had been trying to negotiate with Mr. Thompson as mayor and the city council at that time on certain matters. We'd met and met and met and met. Mayor Thompson told us at a prior meeting that he and the council had agreed on some of our requests. We went to the meeting to sign the agreement publicly with the city council and apparently on this particular day, I don't remember the day of the week or anything, the committee from the Jackson Movement went down to negotiate further, and we thought maybe to sign some kind of agreement. When we arrived, you know, we took our seats there in the council chambers. We were looking this way, to the front, that's where the mayor and the commissioners were sitting. We made our statement

after the mayor had made his, and instead of them - and by them I mean Mayor Thompson and the two commissioners - making a statement whether or not they had agreed to what we had asked, Mayor Thompson said he was going to listen to another committee, and that was the committee that included - well, I won't call names because I can't call all the names - but two or three of them worked for the city in some capacity.

DITTMER: Yes.

SMITH: I don't know, all five of them did not work for the city. Of course they had a man as spokesman that nobody trusted by that time.

JONES: Percy Green?

SMITH: Ah, nobody trusted their spokesman. Anyway we just got up and walked out. We wouldn't hear what they had to say. But we just walked out, walked on out. We thought if we did walk out we'd at least save our self-respect. I believe somehow or another the Honorable Allen Thompson seems to have gone back in a shell. Somebody was asking me about him yesterday. I just wonder if his conscience is bothering him about the way he treated us. I think we were intelligent citizens. We were all taxpayers at that time. We were able to explain the things that we were asking for, and all of them were just the things any citizen should have. Why he would do all the crooked things he did to deny us our rights as citizens, American citizens, it's disturbing.

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DITTMER: It's also interesting to conjecture, and I don't know to what extent Allen Thompson was acting on his own and to what extent he was carrying out the wishes of the established white community that put him in power and kept him in power. You hear about mayors salaries being supplemented by Chambers of Commerce. I don't know, we'd like to talk to him sometime.

SMITH: Yes, I want to talk to him too. I would like best in the world to talk to him. Oh, man, I'd like to talk to him. Now, about that I don't know, I don't know. I rather think though that there's a tie-in there. I think he was carrying out the wishes of the far right, I think he was pretty much carrying out their wishes at that time. I rather think they were peas out of the same pod.

JONES: Let me ask you this before we move too far away from it. Inherent in the whole movement ideology is the theory of nonviolence resistance.

SMITH: Yes.

JONES: We were talking earlier about you going into Natchez and being followed by the Klan, and then you said a man wouldn't hurt you if he knew you could hurt him back. Do you feel now that non-violent resistance was the most effective way to achieve the ends desired?

SMITH: Yes, it was the most effective way for group action. Now, for individual action, no. But for group action, time and events have proven that. Time and events have proven that it's the

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most effective way. Nonviolence has changed the face of America, it has, it has changed the face of America. I think we ought to continue that way.

JONES: Do you remember at any time during your work with the Jackson Movement or afterwards that there was any discussion over whether nonviolent resistance should be continued.

SMITH: Oh, yes, that would come quite often. We had many folk who were not of that nonviolent nature. To be frank with you, I was not of that nonviolent persuasion either, because of my prior experiences. But I found out that that was the right approach. Yes, we had a lot of them who didn't believe that, but we were able to convert them and to restrain them.

JONES: Was there any group within the white power structure that the Jackson Movement could approach, that was responsive to the needs of the Jackson Movement?

SMITH: Yes, there was. Here we go again, because some of them are still living, some of them have passed on. Yes, there was. There were white people within the power structure who were honorable, who recognized the difficulties there, and they recognized that changes should be made, but they were powerless in the sense that - and some of them even talked to Allen Thompson and folk like that. They talked to him, but their advice didn't prevail in so many instances. Some of

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them are still living, they have decedents and so on around here. I'd rather not call names there, but they were some of the finest people I've ever known. Yes, some of the finest people I've known. I'm restraining myself because I want - there's nothing wrong about it, but it could be taken out of its context and I wouldn't and you wouldn't want to cause them any harm.

JONES: John Salter in his book about the Jackson Movement talked about the death of Medgar Evers and the intense emotion and the type of response it drew from people in the Jackson Movement. What do you remember of the conflicting emotions within the movement after Medgar Evers' death?

SMITH: It was not only my responsibility as chairman but of all of those who were helping to conduct the effort - after that incident down at the intersection of Lynch and Terry Road we evaluated the whole thing very carefully, and we knew that the man who had killed Mr. Medgar Evers was just the triggerman; that wasn't the whole group that had planned it or even executed it by no means. And to get a lot of people killed wouldn't hurry the things we were trying to achieve, so we determined to put a damper on violence. Of course, the Department of Justice, they cooperated. The fine way Mr. John Doar, assistant U.S. Attorney General, was able to lend a lot of aid to us, and give a lot of advice to us, he and his staff, just helped so much. I would say we averted a lot of bloodshed here

that might otherwise have occurred. The bloodshed wouldn't have hurried things on ahead anyway; it might have set them back. There were some who visited here who didn't like our approach. They thought that we should've been more militant. We thought we took a saner course. I still believe that's the right course. Well, what we wanted was justice, and the average white, or black too for that matter, he or she when it's boiled right down, he or she wants justice for everybody. Just as blacks can be aroused to march and demonstrate and all, whites can be aroused. In our saner moments we just stop and say, "There's no need in doing that. We'll take another course." Well, it's good to evaluate things. There's always a way to achieve what you want to achieve. It might be of interest to you and to many other people - and again I won't call names. I'm not afraid to call names, but if you have confidence in me, I won't abuse your confidence.

DITTMER: Sure.

SMITH: I've known white people who were running things, and some of them are still living and are still running things here in Mississippi, to tell me and to tell others, say, "You helped to free me," maybe not in just those words, but that's what they meant. This one particular man, that's what he said, he said, "You freed me! You made me a free man!" This

man that said that was and is a powerful man here, powerful in the state of Mississippi, powerful man. Now that's since the struggle now. That's in this period of rebuilding. We've had various kinds of committees and councils operating to improve conditions. This one was a group of whites and a group of blacks and it was trailblazing. It had a whole lot of white and black working together. We just took the first thing: they were using Negro. At that time we were not using "black" to identify "Negroes," we were using the "Negro." The chairman, he was as fine a man as I've ever known, but he said, "Nigra." So one day he just filled me up, and - I won't call his name; he wouldn't mind if I called it, but it just wouldn't be right and I didn't call him, I called another white man, I said, "Let's you and I say 'go' together." I said, "Go." He said, "Go." I said, "Let's say it again: Go." He said, "Go." I say, "Let's say grow." "Grow." I said, "Yeah. Let's say Ne-gro." I said, "Let me hear you say it by yourself." He said, "Ne-gro." I said, "You can say it!" I didn't hear "nigra" no more in that meeting.

DITTMER: Oh, yes.

SMITH: Yes. It's just the little things of life. Well, I just about called names there. These things changed gradually, and they changed gradually, and they changed gradually. They

were fine men all the time, but they were just a part of the system, and they were just part of it, that's all. Back when I was coming up, long before you were cutting a moustahe I'd have to call you, "Mister." Yes, if some little sassy white boy wanted you to call him mister, he might be twelve or thirteen, he say, "Nigger, can't you say 'mister'?" Well, you know - that was it. I mean that that was just one of the indignities that were heaped upon blacks. It was a hangover from slavery. It was just - oh, I'll get running off and talking too much. My sons tell me I talk too much. But over in the economic field we see blacks in large numbers, and whites too, for that matter, that don't seem to know how to handle money, how to spend money, don't know what to do with money; drawing a salary, make a given amount, spend all of that; salary doubled, I mean without inflation now, salary doubled, spend all of that, and nothing left over to have any capital stock in anything. You say, "Well, those blacks are trifling, they can't think." That is a hangover from slavery. That's a hangover from slavery. The hangover from slavery I remember well. I told you about those little stores every two or three miles apart. Okay, the blacks who farmed, and the poor whites who farmed, they were in the same boat; they didn't have cash money across the year. You go to the store and get your supplies, your

meat, your food, the few clothes that you were going to get, but no money. At the end of the year, whatever portion you had coming out of that crop, the first thing you'd do would be to pay up your bill. After them bills you never have anything to take home from the little cotton that you made. The straw-boss would tell him, "If you had another good crop year you might get some money." That system prevailed, and we have a hangover from that now. We have a hangover from that now. We don't know how to handle money. I remember so well as a boy when I'd see some blacks that had a dollar maybe, and a dollar was a lot of money then, and he'd go in the store and get a box of sardines for a nickel and a box of crackers for a nickel, and you could get a nickel's worth of cheese, so he'd go in there and buy him some crackers, cheese and sardines, and come back out and eat that, sit around and giggle and loud talk a while, and if he had some more money he'd get up and go back in there and buy him something else. He would go buy him something to eat and come on back out and sit down and eat that. If they had them old big drinks, everytime he bought all the other stuff he'd buy him one of those big drinks. He would just continue to do that until he spent that whole dollar,

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already poor and not hungry anymore. He's got that money in his pocket and he's long wanted some candy like that or something. Well, it's a free country and he's free to do it, but he has no sense of proportion. He doesn't know what money is for. He doesn't know how to spend some of it and keep some of it. As a followup to that, I don't know what your sociologists will say, but I was telling you I drove through Harlem here the other day - years ago I said, "I never want to go back through there anymore." Once you see some parts of Harlem you never want to see it again. You just look at the conditions there and you just wonder, you say, "Well, there's lots of trifling." Well, there's not any more trifling people there than anywhere else. That thing is inbred in him down through generations there, and in his cultural background. The folks he sees at church on Sunday, those folks have the same kind of background. It's hard to get that out of him. So you put him down in Harlem - and you don't even need to put him there, he'll drift into ghettos like we have here in Jackson. Some of them have diplomas in economics. Maybe they don't live in the ghetto itself. But there's a whole lot left to be desired in the economic area. We're going to have to acquaint as best we can all of our citizens, white and black, with the economic reality of life. Lots of white

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folk don't have it. I went through a section yesterday evening and saw people who had three and four cars. You know, how can a family use three or four cars? My son, he wants his car, my daughter wants her car, my wife needs her car; that may last a while, but it will play out. That's not sound, that's not sound economically.

DITTMER: Speaking about that legacy of slavery there, I did some research several years back on black businesses in Georgia in the early part of the twentieth century. One of the statements made there was one of the number of reasons why black businesses and businessmen were not successful was that this was not a skill they learned during slavery, that the masters were certainly not going to school their property in entrepreneurial skills. You were something of an exception then; a very successful businessman in the most racist state in the country. Could you tell us a little bit about your grocery and any other enterprises that you would like to mention, and to what do you attribute your success? And what, if any, opposition or cooperation did you get from counterparts in the white community?

SMITH: Well, where I was born - I told you where I was born: the hills out from Utica - my grandfather, who had been a slave, got land around there. When he was freed he

walked about four miles from the slavemaster's estate and bought him a little piece of ground, and he added on to it, I understand, every year. This was before I was born. But the fact that he had that land, and I was born over there after he died, it kind of inspired me to kind of want to, you know, get a hold of some land and a little money. I understand the old man knew how to make money; an old slave, never learned to read and write. He made money raising cotton, and he'd bury his money. That sounds funny. My son says this was wrong. He buried his money every year in three different places. One place he buried the money was - gold or silver - where he knew he wouldn't need that money for this crop year. Another place he buried he thought there would be a possibility that he may run out, and I'll put this here. And then over here in another place he said, "Well, this is the place I'll set the money aside to use this crop year, to make this crop." Well, silly as that may seem it seemed economically sound to me because then if you put your money in the bank somewhere it was his word against somebody else's, and that wouldn't work back there at all. It would be his word against the word of a white person in court. Anyway, that inspired me to want to make some money honestly and to get

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ahold of some land honestly, and some - well I reckon he wanted to have some cattle and other stock. Well, just one thing followed another. The place where I was raised there, both my father and mother said that was the old slavemaster's estate on my grandmother's side. That's where I go everyday now. That's where I'll go this afternoon after I get through with what I have to do, I'll go down there. That was the kind of inspiration it gave to me. We never have been sharecroppers or anything like that. We've always lived on our own land.

DITTMER: So when you started your grocery, for example, you had some capital of your own?

SMITH: Very little. I didn't have much, but I managed to move along. I had the land the house was on.

JONES: And the question about if you had cooperation with the white community.

SMITH: We had some.

DITTMER: Opposition as well, I mean ...

SMITH: We've always had opposition.

DITTMER: ... other than honest competition.

SMITH: Well, you want honest competition, it makes for better business. But we've had all kinds of opposition, all kinds of opposition.

JONES: Any that was particularly harsh, say during the movement?

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SMITH: Oh, yes. I've hardly mentioned that part of it. The Klan was against us with everything they could muster during the Movement. They got in behind me personally. I had - we had bodyguards, even though I could guard myself. They weren't paid. They were volunteers. We had bodyguards. Later on we had bodyguards at the meetings of the Movement.

DITTMER: And they were armed?

SMITH: Yes, they were armed. In fact, we had to tell Mayor Thompson, you know ... we had to tell him that too. We couldn't expect any protection from him.

DITTMER: No.

SMITH: And what they offered as protection were really snitches who were there to see and hear what was going on. We had to tell them we didn't want that kind of protection; "Please don't send them back." Of course with my business the Klan made all kinds of threats and broke out windows and everything else, and instead of the police protecting us, they were protecting the Klansmen.

JONES: Do you remember any particular incident during that period that was particularly frightening? I remember reading that Martin Luther King said that the time he felt the most fear during the movement was when he had to march in Philadelphia a year to the day after the students were murdered there. Are there any incidents that

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you remember, and I'm not trying to be sensational, but that made you particularly scared for your life?

SMITH: I reckon it sounds ... well, yes there were a lot of incidents. Yes, there were a whole lot of incidents. When you say any particular instance; well, let me see about one over the other. I don't know, there were so many then. In fact, I just don't know. I know we went to address a rally in Natchez. It had been advertized pretty widely. And when we arrived there in Natchez at the place where the rally was supposed to be held the place was locked up and we were told that another location had been secured. Well, it was late - by late I mean it was after 9:00 that night - to they told us to go around to, I believe it was a park or a baseball ground, or whatever it was; I'd never been there before. In fact, I haven't been there since. But it was at night. Somebody was leading us on outside Natchez. If it was not in the city limits, it was adjacent to the city limits. We turned to our right and came on back in, and just as we turned off the highway onto the road leading to the park or golf course or whatever it was there, all of the lights went off. We could see how far we were from - I don't think it was a building, I think it was just open ground where we going to be. So we went on several hundred feet, and the lights didn't come back on. Somebody was urging us to go

go on, that the lights were coming on. We hesitated around there awhile, and finally we determined that that didn't make sense, that all the lights go out and were going to stay out that long and go out right at the time when we were almost to our destination. Well, that was frightening because there were so many people, women and children. It was frightening because we did not know if they were going to start shooting into the crowd or whatnot. But, as the Lord would have it, didn't anything happen. It might be well for us to remember that during all of our struggles, a lot of us were praying to God sincerely for guidance and for protection. As I look back on it now I know that we did receive that from the Lord, in a mysterious way to be sure, but I know that we did receive it.

JONES: Were you involved in the march, I believe it was the day of Medgar Evers funeral, in downtown Jackson when John Doar stood between the marchers and the Jackson Police and the highway patrolmen?

SMITH: Well, I was still the chairman and I led the march, yes. John Doar was in front of me.

JONES: What exactly happened, from your perspective?

SMITH: Well, the city police and others wanted to stop us. They used the same tactics then that they used later down at the intersection of Terry Road and Lynch Street. But Mr. Doar

stepped out and addressed them. I forgot who was the head of that, the police, but he addressed them. Well, the fact that he was here beyond a doubt prevented bloodshed, the fact that Mr. John Doar was here on that occasion prevented bloodshed. Now I am of the opinion that all of these things had a lot to do with helping to change the minds of people not only across the country, but changed the minds of a lot of white people here in Mississippi. I had an idea it did.

DITTMER: What about the summer of 1964 in that connection? You mentioned the Council of Federated Organizations earlier. Looking back on that long hot summer, what are your thoughts about the effectiveness of it, particularly of bringing down all the white students from the North, a positive or negative effect?

SMITH: Oh, Lord, it had a positive effect. What's-his-name Brown, the Governor of California, he came. In fact, he stayed down there with us. We had the little Free Press paper published in the back of my place at that time. Well, Brown stayed around here two or three days with us. But he was just one of a number of them. Oh, my God, there were just so many of them that are now holding high places in government or some of the professions all over. So the fact that those students came, yes, indeed, that helped. And Tougaloo, and Millsaps to a much lesser degree, but as far as Millsaps could go, I mean; but Tougaloo was a haven

for freedom lovers at that time. Yes, a haven for freedom lovers. Yes, the students, the Freedom Riders ... now, among the Freedom Riders, it's just like everything else. I went downtown last night for something or other around 10:30. There was a bench out there where folk catch the bus at the intersection of Capitol and Roach Streets in front of the federal building there.

DITTMER: Yes.

SMITH: Some fellow was out there, I reckon he was asleep; his leg all cocked-up there on the bench. I said, "Well, now this is a city. You can't say everybody's doing that, but ~~that's~~ that's the first time I've seen that." I don't know whether he was drunk or what. His sack was laying down there on the ground. So the same thing's true there. You had some maybe undesirables, but very few. Most of those students were sincere, they were doing what they could. They knew the old system was wrong, and they just wanted to be identified with the people who wanted to make meaningful changes in the right direction. That's a healthy sign. That's good for America.

JONES: Do you think that in that summer the civil rights movement turned the corner toward making the rapid advances and changes that came about afterwards?

SMITH: I'm not sure about the '64 part of it, but if '64 is the year, yes, that's right. That's after Dr. King's death. Is that after President Kennedy's death?

DITTMER: After Kennedy's death and before King's death.

SMITH: Well, now Bobby was killed first. Wait a minute. Yes, Bobby was killed before the President.

DITTMER: No. President Kennedy was killed in November of '63, and then Martin King was killed in, what?

JONES: April of '68.

DITTMER: April of '68, and then Bobby in June of '68. But, of course, the Civil Rights Bill was signed in '64, and then Voting Rights a year later.

SMITH: Right. I would think that we turned the corner when we got those two bills through the Congress. I think essentially that's when we turned the corner. But we're not too far around the corner now. We don't want to forget that. We're on our way.

JONES: By 1964, what had happened to the Jackson Movement?

SMITH: Well, it had accomplished its purposes then. Any meeting of that kind, when you accomplish your original purposes, well, you disband. It didn't formally disband, but it just waned away. It was largely for the Voting Rights Bill and the equal accomodation rights bill. So after those passed, unless we'd come up with something else ... but most of us thought then, "Maybe we better digest what we have." I don't think that was a bad idea.

DITTMER: It seems that a lot of the things you were asking for in the Jackson Movement were incorporated in the bills; equal

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accommodations and the like.

SMITH: Yes.

DITTMER: Were you at all surprised when the Jackson Chamber of Commerce in 1964 came out for obeying the civil rights laws once it was passed. A number of people I know thought that was quite a bold step for the Jackson Chamber of Commerce to take, recommending that folks obey the law.

SMITH: Well, now the folks who head the Chamber of Commerce now and headed it then are the folk who have stores, banks and factories around here. They knew that whatever their personal opinion about race relations might have been, they knew that when mob rule takes over you are going to set things afire, and they would lose something. When you go to busting out plate-glass windows and all like that, it costs them. I'm not trying to belittle their motivations, but at least they knew that. Maybe there was a change of heart too, but anyway, I'm glad they did it.

DITTMER: Suggesting that a lot of it was their economic self-interests were better served by calling for compliance than by carrying on an old position that they knew would not be successful.

SMITH: Yes, well, a great big part of life has to do with economics. So, yes, I'm sure that had a lot to do with their making that decision, but thank God they made it.

DITTMER: Were you terribly disappointed with the white church during the civil rights movement? During that time did you have any sort of connections with white clergymen in the community

who were well-meaning and were trying to do things and didn't lose their jobs?

SMITH: No, and it was quite disturbing. It was very disturbing. Now, among the Church of Christ followers - well, even the Church of Christ followers in this area didn't cry out much. No, among the United Methodist we had some support. There were some Episcopal and Baptist clergy and others who joined in helping to rebuild black church buildings that had been burned. And among the Catholics we had almost whole-hearted support. That was very encouraging. Bishop Brunini was here at that time, Father Law, and I can't call the names of all those fellows. Father Law is a Bishop in Missouri now, and I can't call the names of the others, but the Catholic Church certainly did lend its influence to bring about meaningful change. But back to your question, yes, we were disappointed. Since Christ teaches love we thought the Christian Churches should've been identified on the side of freedom for all and the equal rights laws.

JONES: When was Allen Thompson voted out? When was his last term? Do you know?

SMITH: I don't recall the exact date.

DITTMER: Russell Davis - now we're getting into my time here - Russell Davis was first elected in what, '68, '69, depending when, or '70, depending when they hold elections

here, off year or even year. But Thompson was still mayor when we got here in '67.

JONES: Did he ever relent?

SMITH: No, not to my knowledge. I haven't seen him since he went out of office. I would like to see him. I would like to see him.

JONES: Did you ever meet with him formally or otherwise after the Jackson Movement dissolved?

SMITH: No, I never met with him as an individual after the time the Jackson Movement began. I knew him as an individual long before that. All of our meetings with him were representing the Jackson Movement. I had no reason to talk with him after the movement dissolved.

JONES: But in Jackson, did the atmosphere, or the fervor of the police force change here after say '64 or '65?

SMITH: It changed very little. We had a group there in charge of the police department that recognized the fact that you could give a little and still hold a lot, and they used that technique. We tried to get Mayor Thompson to hire some black policemen, and we quoted some population statistics and crime statistics. We thought that, if for no other reason, black policemen might be able to help control crimes better in black neighborhoods, and it was a long time before we were able to get any kind of commitment from him. He hired somebody just because he had to hire somebody, and he just hired somebody, put it that way. It wasn't a good faith appointment, and yet it broke the ice.

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JONES: And you say that you were connected with the 1964 Freedom Summer in that they had a press in the back of your store?

SMITH: Oh, yes, the Mississippi Free Press was located there.

JONES: Were you connected with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee in any other way during the summer of '64?

SMITH: Nothing, except to encourage them.

DITTMER: What did you think of Bob Moses?

SMITH: Bob Moses was one of the finest men that I ever knew. I read some stuff about him later on trying to tie him in there, but I knew Bob Moses as a quiet, efficient man. Mr. Moses could probably actually tell a lot of the things I forgot about the campaign I'm sure. He would get to my campaign office every day about the time I'd get there, and he was there when we closed. In fact, I told you about being down at Fayette at the cafe, Moses was there during that. One night - well, I'm getting way off. Moses was a fine fellow. He was a deep thinker. Now, whatever else he might have had I don't know but he showed no evidence of disloyalty to this country while he was with me. I had no reason to suspect him of being anything other than a loyal American citizen. And on all these different trips I'm telling you about, Moses was right there. Sometimes I would get somebody else to drive, but on most of the trips it was just Moses and I. We went in places it was dangerous for us to go, but we just went there. He was a deep thinker.

Where is Bob now?

DITTMER: He is at Harvard.

SMITH: Yes?

DITTMER: I don't know him. I've never met him. Everybody I've talked with talks about him the way you do. He's sort of a living legend. He was in Africa for a number of years. He's working on a Ph.D. I believe in linguistics now at Harvard.

SMITH: He's a fine fellow. Bob must be, he was older than my son - well, I don't know, but he's in his fifties now.

JONES: I didn't realize he was that old.

SMITH: Well, now maybe he isn't that old.

JONES: I was thinking that when he was down here he was in his mid to late twenties.

DITTMER: He is at least forty-five.

SMITH: I forget how many years he told me he'd taught in the New York City school system. Maybe was just in his late twenties then, if he'd been teaching maybe four or five years.

DITTMER: But he was quite active in your campaign?

SMITH: Oh, yes. He was the backbone of it in a way because it was fourteen counties, and in some of them it was dangerous to even say you wanted to vote. A lot of times it was no one with me but Bob, not because the folks were cowards back here, but, for instance, down in Wilkinson County, the folks who would have gone with me didn't get off work in time and we'd have to leave early enough to go on and be there. Bob was always there, he

was always there. You know, there were a lot of people who had a meaningful hand in that civil rights struggle, a lot of people. There was a man you've never heard of - well, you heard of him but you never saw him - I saw his widow up there recently: Reverend Bender.

DITTMER: Oh, yes. Of course, I know Mrs. Bender very well.

SMITH: Was he there when you came?

DITTMER: No, no, he'd died, but Mrs. Bender was working at the library then and now. He was the Tougaloo chaplain.

SMITH: Well, the little remnant of the NAACP, the little handful, he was with that handful in the beginning. People have cars now, but he had to walk and cover most of the area where he was trying to help build the NAACP.

DITTMER: I've heard so much about him.

SMITH: If there ever was a hero of the struggle for freedom, he was one of them.

DITTMER: I think he was one of the leaders of the challenge of Bilbo.

SMITH: Anything that was worthwhile, you could count on him.

JONES: What is your reaction to the statement made now that the civil rights movement is dead, that it won, that it accomplished its goals and is now dead?

SMITH: No, it's not dead, it's form has changed, the form of the civil rights effort has changed. By changed I mean that some of the folk who would be leading the civil rights struggle out here,

they are serving in the legislature now, the ones that would lead it out here are in city government, or working in one of the banks. It's not dead, but its form changed. The civil rights struggle has taken the burden off the white man as much as it has the black man, because it's getting it off the white man's conscience. This is so far-fetched: I needed to talk with a man here Saturday, and I looked in the telephone book to find out where he lived, and there were six or eight folk with that family name. Well, I happen to know what the situation is: about half of them are white and about half of them are black and they've all got the same name and live right down there in that little neighborhood together. But I did recognize one to call and that was the black one so that I could get in touch with the other one. I passed through that community again yesterday afternoon where the white members of that group, they got a nice store out there in the country, and I just stopped in there for a little while. So that's how confusing the whole situation is. It's hard to hurt the black man without hurting the poor white man. If you get a black man to do a certain job for so much a day according to the economics of the day, and here's a white man wanting to do the same job or something like it, you pay minimum and not too much more. Economics demand that. So while the civil rights struggle relieves us blacks, it relieves the conscience of the white man. It relieves his conscience. He's known all along that it was wrong to deny a man, or a

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child for that matter, human dignity. He's known all along it's wrong for him to, whether by consent or rape or whatnot, he's known that it's wrong for him to breed by that young black girl. She'd come up with a white baby, and no prosecution, no nothing, and there the child is. So he's known that. It's a whole lot of relief for a lot of white folks, so that their conscience just won't have to keep killing them that they were doing those things. We must still bear in mind just like the old man laying on the bench down there: we are always going to have somebody on the park bench. But for the masses of people right here in Mississippi, white and black, I think the majority of them are honest and honorable. We realized that the old system wasn't good for anybody. I think the majority, white and black, are trying to make an honest effort to adjust to a system of freedom, justice and equality for all. I think we're aiming at such a system now. We haven't arrived, I don't mean that, but I think we're headed in that direction.

JONES: We've talked for about two hours and I know we're all tired. Do you have anything else?

DITTMER: No. I'm just so delighted to have the opportunity to talk with you. I've wanted to meet you for such a long time.

SMITH: Well, I'm glad to have the opportunity to meet both of you gentlemen.

JONES: We certainly appreciate the gift of the tape and your sitting and talking with us.

SMITH: Well, I told you why I didn't call names: some of those people are very highly placed. Personally, they wouldn't object to it, but with the folk they've got to deal with, you know, it'd be something else altogether. I appreciate this opportunity to say something about what went on back there.

DITTMER: We appreciate your honesty and candor and information.

JONES: You've had a fascinating life.

SMITH: Well, I don't know about that, I'm just glad the Lord left me here. I'm glad to have been here in this time period. After all, America's just two hundred and something years old - what is it?

JONES: Four.

SMITH: 204 years old? Yes. So to have gone through with the remnants of slavery and to have gone through so many other things that we've gone through as a nation, and now America is the bulwark of the free world. What does it say on the Statue of Liberty there: "Give me your"

JONES: "Your poor, your tired, your homeless."

SMITH: Well, that's a good saying. As distasteful as it might have been to many, and I certainly didn't and still don't understand all that was involved, but they let all those Cubans come in here the other day. Well, that's in conformity with what we have on the Statue of Liberty. Some of them say they want to go back, well, let them go. Let those who want freedom, that

we offer it to them. We're still building a nation, we're still growing as a nation, and it's just great to be an American. It is, it's just great to be an American, whether you're white or black or whoever you are, it's great to be an American. We have some limitations, but, my God, beyond those limitations you can do just about what you want to do to make your life a better life and your fellow man's life a better life. So it's great to be an American.

JONES: That's a good place to end it. Thank you again.

SMITH: All right.

(End of Interview)

(Transcribed by John Jones)

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