

An Interview with

MR. WILLIE CARSON

April 2, 1977

Interviewed by

Daisy M. Greene

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Scope Note: The Washington County Library System, with assistance from the Mississippi Department of Archives and History, conducted oral history interviews with local citizens. The project interviews took place between 1976 and 1978. The interviewees included long-term residents of the Greenville-Washington County area in their late 50's and older.

April 2, 1977. Daisy Greene interviewing Mr. Willie Carson, who lives at 1718 Queen City Lane.

Your birth date?

CARSON: January 10, 1920.

GREENE: And the place of your birth?

CARSON: Elizabeth, Mississippi.

GREENE: And your age?

CARSON: 57 years old.

GREENE: Your mother's maiden name?

CARSON: Rosalie Linwood.

GREENE: Your father's name?

CARSON: Charlie Carson.

GREENE: And you went to school -- ?

CARSON: Greenville Public Schools.

GREENE: And, of course, you went to a Police Academy, too, didn't you?

CARSON: Well, no, not at that time. During the time I joined the service, they had their schools set up by the FBI Department, and they'd come in yearly and give classes in all types of law enforcement.

GREENE: Didn't you go to a training school here?

CARSON: Yes, ma'am, I did. I went to the Southern Trade School. It was right after I came out of the Army. I went to the Army in 1941, stayed there three years and a

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half and came out in 1945. Around in October 1945 I started the Trade School, training under Elgin Turney and his brother. Lawyer W. T. Wynn started the Southern Trade School, Inc. for veterans and I attended that school 4 years. I took up carpentry, and the refresher courses in high school and first year college courses, under the direction of Mr. W. H. Greene, the principal of Julia L. Armstrong at that time. He was in the academic department at Southern Trade School.

GREENE: Mr. Carson, I understand that you were the first official black policeman in the state. How did that come about?

CARSON: Yes, ma'am, I was. This town has always had some kind of a liberal outlook, and people here had been able to vote without being molested in any way, or without economic pressure. I think at this time the town formed what they called the Democratic League of voters. Mr. Greene was the president. Other officers were Mr. Levi Chapple, Mr. James Carter and Rev. H. H. Humes. They were all responsible for the Democratic voters being registered and they urged blacks to vote, without any intimidation whatsoever. This was in 1951, when we had a large scale of black crime on the main thoroughfare, Nelson Street. At this time, about 35 people per year would get killed or mugged in the 700 block of Nelson. These people decided if they had a black officer patrolling Nelson - one of their kind who could be with them, it might help deter that type of crime-murder in the streets. As soon as they went

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through the procedures with the proper officials here in Greenville - Chief Hollingsworth, the Chief of Police, and Mayor Archer, they decided that they would have a black policeman. At this time I was playing in Little Wynn's Band. Winn was the fellow I looked up to, he and Mr. Greene. I look upon those two fellows for information concerning the pattern of my life. I believe that. They had plenty of sense. I went to them for counseling, whether I should take this job or not. They both admitted readily, "Yes." It had a future, I had a wife and five children. The job had retirement at 20 years. I'd have a much better future in taking this type job; the salary I was making at this time was doubled - the salary then was \$209.00 a month, and I was working at Goyers as a warehouse laborer, making \$27.00 a week. This area at that time was \$209.00 a month, white or either colored. There was no difference in the pay.

GREENE: Well, where was Mr. Burnley in the scale?

CARSON: Mr. Burnley was then a Captain in the Police Department.

GREENE: Oh, I see. I remember when he made his presentation to Winchester Davis, he said that Winn had no political strings, but it seems that he recommended you, and they looked on his recommendations with favor.

CARSON: This is true, he and Mr. Greene.

GREENE: I see.

CARSON: Mr. Greene played an important part in

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verifying my schooling and integrity. Mr. Davis was a man here in town that had done a lot of things for a lot of people, and they had come for his decision and recommendation.

GREENE: Now you say Nelson was a rough place.

CARSON: Yes, that was a rough place.

GREENE: How did you get the respect of the black people on Nelson Street?

CARSON: After I came into the Force, I'd been in training six weeks under the direction of the FBI agents from Washington, D.C. I had taken basic policing and tactics of arrest, tactics of approach and also traffic courses, which gave some kind of knowledge of how to perform a police officer's duty.

GREENE: And how to get along with people?

CARSON: Right. And, after I finished this course, then I was assigned to Nelson Street February 21, 1951. At this time there was only me, one black. I did nothing but night work. I'd come on at 8 o'clock and get off at 6 o'clock in the morning.

GREENE: Walking all night?

CARSON: Walking all night.

GREENE: Oh, my goodness! Does anybody have a stringent beat like that now?

CARSON: No, I don't think they have.

GREENE: Do they shorten the hours or give them cars?

CARSON: They shorten the hours and give them cars.

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The beat has been cut in half - the beat from Broadway to Wilczinski and the one from Wilczinski to Railroad Avenue.

GREENE: Well, that was the beginning.

CARSON: That was the beginning. At this time we had the Air Base. We had --

GREENE: M.P.'s ?

CARSON: No, they had MP's but they only patrolled at the Air Base, from town to the Air Base. We didn't have any MP's on Nelson Street.

GREENE: Did the soldiers give you trouble, once they got to Greenville?

CARSON: No, I can't say that they did, like the soldiers at the Air Base and the populous there --

GREENE: What?

CARSON: Populous, the City populous, the citizens of Greenville. I always referred to them as the black population.

GREENE: Oh, I see.

CARSON: It is our assignment.

GREENE: The populous. You had control of the black populous and the black soldiers in your area or beat.

CARSON: Right, and we also had the migrant Mexican labor. We would have something like 1500 or 2000 and they'd all migrate down in the north end of town on Steele's Alley and on North Theobald, anywhere in that section they could get housing.

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GREENE: They'd settle among the blacks.

CARSON: Settle among the blacks.

GREENE: Not among the whites.

CARSON: No, ma'am, and we had these people that looked for pleasure every night on Nelson Street. At this time a thousand people would be on Nelson Street from six o'clock in the morning until six o'clock the next morning, and that's every night a week. On Saturdays and Fridays they'd just fill up, you could just -- everywhere.

GREENE: Did you have any help on Saturdays, on weekends?

CARSON: For a while I started, I walked with a couple of white officers. It was what they called "breaking me in." They walked for a month, and then I walked the other two months by myself. Then the second black officer was hired, George Davis; then we took it over, and as the time went by, with the learning we had, with Army experience and schooling, we were able to set something like a pattern of how we were going to do, and what we were going to do about the killings. Now, killing was out of ignorance, ignorance from blacks, caused by jealousy and drinking. Now these are the type of people we'd just give more attention to than others. If we'd see a man pushing a drunk, we'd take him over to the jailhouse.

GREENE: To keep him out of trouble.

CARSON: Right.

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GREENE: Were you armed?

CARSON: Yes, ma'am. All police regalia. We were allowed to use blackjacks, which we never used too frequently. If I'd ever have to get in a scrap, I'd always use my hands. If scrapping time came around, I always felt that if I ever had to fight a man, whatever he'd do to me even if I was a policeman or not, I'd fight him. I always will talk to him before I'd take any action against him whatsoever, but I'd watch this type of people - they'd get drunk, with their long knives, ice picks and razors. I would disarm them and put them in jail.

Now, I'd single them out - a lot of them they wouldn't be doing anything but just standing there looking around. They didn't know we were looking at them.

GREENE: They were just trouble makers.

CARSON: Right.

GREENE: Prospective trouble makers.

CARSON: We let them know we had our eye on them.

GREENE: Did they resent that?

CARSON: At first they did, then some of them would retaliate with words and go to drinking but I didn't pay that any attention. Some of them flatly refused to go to jail after I arrested them and say you'd have to kill them. George Davis and I always stuck to that method. Sometimes we'd use a little boxing, but somehow we always turned out ahead. So then we began to gain respect. They knew we were treating them fair,

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you know.

GREENE: Putting them in jail was for their own good, wasn't it?

CARSON: Right.

GREENE: To keep him out of trouble.

CARSON: To save them from killing somebody and save them from getting killed.

GREENE: Was your life ever in danger?

CARSON: Two or three times it was, I arrested a man for driving drunk one night, and I didn't have a car. He ran into the sign in front of Mr. Horeb Church, right to the bottom step. I went down the street to try to stop it and when I got there he was still sitting in his car drunk. I opened the door and asked him to get out, but he sat there a couple or more minutes and then he got out of his car, staggering about and threw his hands in the air. I didn't ask him to put up his hands but I patted his pockets and looked in the car. When I looked in the car, I could see in the mirror that he was getting a knife from his sleeve. He was drawing back to swing down on me and I fell on the ground, and drew my pistol. He just stood there trying to make up his mind and he swang around with the knife, hitting my arm. That made the pistol go off. I didn't pull the trigger.

GREENE: That frightened him.

CARSON: Well, when the pistol went off, the bullet hit him right in the shoulder. He dropped the knife and

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started running. I often thought about that because the pistol was pointed at his chest at first. He ran, he ran out to Metcalfe.

GREENE: Ran to Metcalfe!

CARSON: Yes, ma'am. He fell out. Somebody found him and put him in the hospital. On another occasion he had been shot in the shoulder before, but the bullet had not been removed. He said I shot him twice, but the doctors saw it was an old bullet.

Another time, during the Civil Rights struggle, a group went to turn my car over. One boy had a gun in a book.

GREENE: Had a gun in a book!

CARSON: Right. He'd brought it down in a book which he had carved out.

GREENE: Black boy?

CARSON: Yes, ma'am. His name was Nettiville.

GREENE: Remember his first name?

CARSON: No, I don't. There were about 15 boys in front of the car trying to turn it over. I had to keep my eye on the boy with the gun and was wondering how I'd get out of the car without them grabbing me. At that time there was a shotgun in the car. I opened the door and fired in the air. They took off, but I was a little shook up.

GREENE: I imagine so. Were they teenagers?

CARSON: Yes, they were.

GREENE: Those were turbulent times.

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Didn't you tell me that some said they would let a white man arrest them but not a black man?

CARSON: They'd tell you that on many occasions. We'd run into domestic arguments - man and wife. The first thing they'd say, "You ain't going to arrest me."

GREENE: Did you arrest white people?

CARSON: Yes, ma'am. They never did tell me I couldn't arrest white people. The day I was hired the Chief of Police told me he wouldn't put me on Washington Avenue, because that was a white street and that anything I would do would be wrong. He said he was going to put me on Nelson where my people were and if I treated the people right someone would testify in my behalf. He also said if I let a white person come on Nelson Street and ran me off, I didn't have any business on the beat. We were not told we couldn't arrest whites.

GREENE: Did you have any trouble with the whites?

CARSON: No, we didn't. Mostly when we said something they'd obey right away. I guess they knew they had no business on Nelson anyway.

GREENE: Did you have trouble with the Mexicans?

CARSON: They'd be with the ladies and the other group sometimes. Not too much trouble.

GREENE: You stayed on the force 20 years.

CARSON: 21 years, from 1959 - 1972.

GREENE: What part did you play in the student

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uprising at Mississippi Valley College in 1969?

CARSON: As you know there was violence when students uprose at Kent State and Jackson State. Since Mississippi Valley State College was all black, officials thought it would be dangerous to send white troops there. Governor John B. Williams, Ken Fairly, head of the Law Enforcement Association, and the Justice Department, tried to come up with a plan to prevent blood shed. They wanted a black officer experienced enough to handle 65 policemen from various parts of the state. Jackson, Biloxi, Hattiesburg, Leland, Cleveland, Meridian, Columbus, Gulfport, Indianola and Winona. There was a black Captain in Detroit who had handled his discipline well. He was considered for the task force at Mississippi Valley State, but Chief William Burnley said there was no need to send to Detroit because they had a man in Mississippi. He knew how I handled the Civil Rights disturbances and that we came out well and good. I was approached about the situation by Chief Burnley. When he asked me if I wanted to take the task force to do something about the black college, it was a challenge to me. I said, "Yes." I felt like I could handle the situation. I felt like I was qualified and wasn't worried about anything.

So, then I met the police from different towns in the Armory at Itta Bena. I wanted them to know me and I wanted to get acquainted with them. The Justice Department and Mr. E. E. Thrash of the Board of Higher Learning were there.

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The Justice Department was there. We set up the organization. I told them that I was in charge, that I didn't want anyone to tell me anything, that if I needed any assistance from any law enforcement agency or any group, or district attorney, I would ask. I said I wanted no invasions on the campus unless I said so for I'd take full responsibility for the security of the Campus. It was agreed and I was sworn in under proper procedure to uphold the law. This gave me full authority and command.

We moved in that night in a dormitory they had just built - my 65 men and I. Immediately I got set up a working roster, just as you'd have for a city. There wasn't but one city in the state, except Jackson, with 65 police under command. Men with rank were put in charge of different shifts of work. I set up an office - clerks and dispatchers. The students were riled up. They came down saying, "The Uncle Tom niggers are here. We're going to kill them, burn the building down -- " They did a lot of things. It was just dark when we arrived. At ten o'clock when everything was organized, we went out to stand around and let the students know we were'nt-afraid. They cursed us a while and made all kinds of ugly remarks. Finally, we went back to the dorm.

GREENE: Do you know where any of those students are now?

CARSON: Yes, ma'am. I run into them daily. Archie Quinn is one. My pastor, Rev. Theopilos C. King, another.

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We talk about those times at Mississippi Valley State College.

GREENE: Archie Quinn is working in the Drug Department in the Greenville Public Schools. Do you know the students grievances?

CARSON: They seemed to be dissatisfied with not having a doctor on Campus. They didn't think Dr. White was fit to be the president of Mississippi Valley State College, because he was an Uncle Tom. To me the man was superb. He built the college up to where it was. He was doing all he could, but the students were indoctrinated. There was a wide gap between students and president until I got there. I told the student leaders that the doors were open, that they could come in and talk whenever they got ready. I wasn't going to infringe on their rights and they weren't going to infringe on mine. I told them "You can't say I'm white", this is a black outfit. If you don't care anything about my outfit, I don't care about your outfit. What I was trying to tell them was if they didn't respect me as a law enforcement officer and think I was going to let them violate the law they were far wrong. They sang and marched every night. It was all right with me just so they didn't damage property.

GREENE: They didn't damage property?

CARSON: Not while I was there.

(Turned tape)

CARSON: They tore up the ambulance. Well yes, they did. They tore up my car the second day. We made the mistake

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of going to the cafeteria and eating with them. That was my mistake. I should have had the men eat in the dorm until we got better acquainted.

GREENE: How did they manage to tear the car up? Did they ruin the tires and break the glass?

CARSON: They pulled out all the wires and turned the car over. When I came out Robert Gettas, one of the student leaders, was standing there looking. I didn't say anything to him. I simply took the men back to the dorm. I knew it was my mistake leaving the car in front of the cafeteria.

One day a student took a plate of hot grits and eggs and threw it in an officer's face, he was from Jackson. Red, as they called him, jumped up and drew his gun and I said, "Man we can't have that. Get something to wash his face."

GREENE: That could have been a big affair.

CARSON: A black police officer has pride in his work and doesn't believe you should bother him and disregard the law.

GREENE: What was done to the boy?

CARSON: Nothing. We didn't do anything to him.

GREENE: Did he give any more trouble?

CARSON: Not after this incident. I called a meeting and said, "We'd have to expect some of these types of things, but our object here is to get the school in condition where it could operate. We don't want to whip or kill anybody unless it is absolutely necessary." I said, "As long as I'm standing, no student gets whipped."

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GREENE: How long were the students in that bad mood?

CARSON: About nine days before they began to negotiate. I told them that when I was a boy there was nothing to inspire me because the colleges were in the southern part of the state. I couldn't understand why they'd want to wreck a black college, when I was their age I could get my mind on nothing but a cotton field.

I also told them that the Legislature, the higher Board of Education and Mr. Thach, they were the ones giving the orders not Mr. White. I told them too that there was no use to do White bodily harm because the legislature, the governor would have to put the doctors there - not White. All he could do was ask for them.

GREENE: Did they eventually get a Campus doctor?

CARSON: I don't know. They had agreed because they'd have to go to Greenwood to see a doctor. After they became involved with me, they began to understand. After a few more days they saw they were marching and marching, but getting no attention. They wanted to know what they could do to get publicity. I said, "Just violate the law - block that highway." The next evening they blacked the distance from that school to the highway.

GREENE: What did you do with them?

CARSON: I wasn't anticipating any arrest, I didn't have anything to haul them away in. The sheriff asked, "What did you arrest all of those black damn niggers for?"

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He said, "I don't have enough room for them - no place to put them. I don't know what I'm going to do with them." I said, "That's your problem."

His problem was he had to feed that crowd of 850.

GREENE: Where did he put them?

CARSON: There was a County Cage, but it was inadequate. They used the word "nigger" and all type of thing. I had to send my officers up to make charges. The highway patrol was standing around so I made the students get on the buses that the Catholic people from St. Francis School loaned, I explained to them if they stirred up the people, there'd be nothing I could do about it and told them "they could holler all they wanted, but stay on the bus. If this mob attacks you, there's nothing I can do."

GREENE: Did they call them pigs?

CARSON: Yes. Parchman was the only place large enough to hold them.

GREENE: It seems they wanted publicity - the headlines. How long were they there?

CARSON: Overnight. They raised the roof off calling mama to come get them, calling papa to come get them. They had a time scrapping blankets because it was cool. The fight was out of them. When we returned to the campus, there was no trouble.

GREENE: That was an experience.

CARSON: Oh, yes. No one had gotten pushed. No

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one had gotten killed. They were pleased with that, I told them, "School is closed, call your parents. Get your belongings. If you don't have a way to get your stuff up, we'll make some arrangements for that.

There was a couple of boys who had been put off campus, but they were hanging around. They were radicals, but they could lead. I told them to stay with me so I could keep my eye on them. They had to do something I said in order to stay on campus. I'd say, "I want that demonstration broken up there. It's in the wrong place." They'd go straight and break it up.

GREENE: You directed the students to a certain extent through the radicals.

CARSON: Right.

GREENE: So the uprising was settled peacefully. I imagine you received quite a few commendations.

(Tape turn, Side 3)

CARSON: Yes, ma'am. I received one from Governor John Bell Williams, from the Board of Trustees of the Institutions of Higher Learning, through Mr. E. E. Thach, from the Justice Department, Chief Burnley, Dr. White, president of Mississippi Valley State College and many parents.

GREENE: When you retired from the Police Department, did they have a big affair?

CARSON: They had what they called a 20 year Retirement Party. All officers and retirants, all the

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chiefs they worked under had their pictures made together.

GREENE: Is that the watch you received?

CARSON: No, the one they gave me is similar to this. I might add, once a police, always a police. They pay you half of your salary. My pay was \$658.00 a month. I still receive half of it. When you close out the money you've put into retirement, then your pay becomes liable for income tax.

GREENE: That's the way it is with teachers. I see you're wearing a gun today. Why?

CARSON: I've never quit wearing a gun. I've arrested many people. Not that I'm afraid or have any problems, but you never can tell. Once I arrested a man who was sent to Whitfield.

GREENE: He had a mental problem?

CARSON: He's out now. One night he walked up to me and made some remarks about what he was going to do. When he saw my gun - that settled it.

GREENE: So you have reason for wearing a gun.

CARSON: Right. I have to sign affidavits against violators and bring them to court. They changed the rank of my police identification card to housing inspector. I still have police authority to make arrest as prescribed by the law.

GREENE: After you left the Police Department, what did you do?

CARSON: I worked for Greenville Public Schools as

supervisor of student activity. I feel I played an important role during the early years of integration. My job was to supervise on the playground and report to parents any problems their children were having in school.

GREENE: Did the whites accept your correction?

CARSON: I always used the right approach and didn't have any trouble. This right approach helped me in my job as Housing Inspector. During the nine months as Housing Inspector, I have demolished 21 houses, not through court procedures, but by using common sense and public relations.

GREENE: How's that?

CARSON: I call the property owner whose house is in a delapidated condition and explain the status of the Housing Code and how it is processed. I also advise them of their rights and the time limitation that the owner has to demolish the house or bring it up to minimum standards. In most cases they comply without court procedure.

GREENE: Let's talk about Winchester Davis Day. What did you think of it?

CARSON: Wonderful! He meant a lot to me and a lot of other people. He wasn't a radical; he was just a religious man and believed in humanity.

GREENE: Have you seen the pictures that were made?

CARSON: Yes, ma'am, I have. I know Winn was happy because many of his old players were there. Garrett, Deal, Burgess, Goodman, Otis Red Boyd, his son Winn, Jr., Mayo,

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Rev. Catholic and Bill Jackson.

GREENE: That was a beautiful cake Rev. Catholic had made at McGraws. It had two trombones on it.

CARSON: Is that right? I didn't see it, I think the band at the school performed well.

GREENE: I was fortunate in getting a tape of Marion Garrett and Darris Deal, also one from this fellow with the white hair from Washington - Lionel Gant. Mayor Burnley read the proclamation for me at the request of Winn's son, Mayo Davis.

CARSON: I think it was an inspiring program.

GREENE: I almost forgot to ask you to tell me the story you told Ms Roberta Miller about golf.

CARSON: In 1943, when I was in the army in Fort Meade, Maryland, I decided to play golf with a couple of fellows, one from California and one from Massachusetts. They looked at one another and sighed, meaning that a fellow from Mississippi couldn't play golf. They knew negroes in Mississippi were not allowed to play golf. To please me, they played because they hoped to get a laugh. I shot a 39.

GREENE: I suppose people who play golf will understand that. Is that a good score?

CARSON: That is a good score. They asked me where did I learn to play. I said I was caddy at the Greenville Golf Club. After they found out I could play, they said, "Oh, you ain't from Mississippi."

Another time I went to a dance. At that time waltzing was popular and I got me a lady and waltzed. Well my friends said, "You know you ain't from Mississippi."

GREENE: If you were from Mississippi, you couldn't waltz?

CARSON: That's right. You weren't supposed to do or know anything. I began to notice the things people said about Mississippi.

GREENE: Our state had a bad name. What about opportunities for blacks?

(Begin Tape 4)

CARSON: Yes, ma'am. I feel that my children have more opportunity in life than I had because of the fact that we had grade schools in this area, which was very hard for a family with more than two childrend to attend school and complete school in my time, and you know this college - Dr. White's - that changed the atmosphere a little better for children in this area to have a desire to go to college, which at the time all our teachers come from the hills. We didn't have teachers to grow up in the delta. Just a few. That was because the lack of, you know, I feel that because of the poverty levels that we just actually weren't inspired to go to a college in this area. Things have changed completely in the voting. There is tremendous voting now so far as blacks are concerned and all a child has to do now is elevate himself and prepare himself. I think he has far greater opportunities,

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and as time goes by they are getting better.

CARSON: Let me add that they didn't give uniforms to policemen as they do today. Officers now have a better go of it, I'll call it that, a better go of it than we did. I borrowed the money from Mr. W. H. Greene to get a uniform, which it cost at that time \$50.00. I had left the job making \$29.00 a week with five children, so it was kind of rough. During the time I entered the Police Department, I might add that we had yearly classes, under the direction of the Bureau of Investigation in Washington, D. C., the FBI, an Academy trained agent would come in and every year we had to have three weeks of training in crime and investigation techniques, traffic, firearms and public relations. During this course of time I can safely say for about 7 years, every year we had this type training. Our Chief of Police, at that time, was Chief Hollingsworth, and he demanded that we would have this type training which would make better officers of the law of Greenville and the state of Mississippi, and Washington County.

GREENE: Did you say that the City pays for the officers' uniforms now, young officers?

CARSON: Today the City pays for the young officers' uniforms.

GREENE: As soon as they get in.

CARSON: As soon as they get in they furnish them a gun and clothing, then they get a yearly allowance for their clothing.

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GREENE: I would like to identify Mr. W. H. Greene.

At the death of Mrs. Lizzie W. Coleman, principal of Number Two School, he succeeded her. When Number Two School was demolished, he was transferred and became principal of Armstrong Elementary School on Redwood Street.

CARSON: This is true.

(GREENE: Any reference made to Mr. William H. Greene as principal of Coleman High School is a misstatement).

(The Conclusion of Interview)

(Transcribed by Vivian Broom)

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