

OH 1979.21. 43

An Interview with

MR. WILLIE DAVIS

July 2, 1978

Interviewed by

Daisy M. Greene

Mississippi  
Department of Archives and History  
and the  
Washington County Library System  
Oral History Project:  
Greenville and Vicinity

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OH 1979.1.044

Interviewee: Willie Davis  
Interviewer: Daisy Greene

Title: An interview with Willie Davis, July 2, 1978 /  
interviewed by Daisy Greene

Collection Title: Washington County Oral History Project

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.

July 2, 1978. This is Daisy Greene interviewing Mr. Willie Davis for the Mississippi Department of Archives and History and the Washington County Library System.

Give me your Chicago address.

DAVIS: 4850 Lake Part, Apartment 711, Chicago, Illinois 60615.

GREENE: Mr. Davis, the streets are thronged with out of state cars, Sacred Heart's campus was crowded yesterday, the V F W and the Elks were crowded to capacity. So was the Ramada Inn, the Holiday Inn and the Downtowner. What's happening here?

DAVIS: It seems as though we are beginning to develop a home welcome celebration. The purpose of this, as you know Mrs. Greene, is to bring our former Greenvillians back home to meet and greet those that left with them and these that came behind us. It is indeed a pleasure at all times to greet friends, as I often say, "We know what we had but we don't know what we're getting, and you can never forget from whence you came." There is no place like home. Home is heaven to me.

GREENE: Well, what's the name of this organization that's bringing these people here?

DAVIS: The Greenville, Mississippi Travel Club, which, as you know, I started this in Chicago in 1969. That was the first Greenville, Mississippi Club. A few of us have

started, but they didn't reach the fame that we are climbing. I'm able to get other cities interested because we've had this celebration here as we had it in Chicago. Now it is beginning to catch fire, and now I can proudly say that St. Louis has a Greenville, Mississippi Club, Oakland, California has a Greenville, Mississippi Club, Los Angeles, California has a Greenville, Mississippi Club, Cleveland, Ohio has a Greenville, Mississippi Club and Detroit.

GREENE: Is this the youngest Club, the Detroit Club?

DAVIS: Yes, it is.

GREENE: What about Cleveland, Ohio?

DAVIS: That's a young Club also and is basically made up with youngsters with a few elderly ones. As you know, we must keep the elders around, because experience is what we need, and with the two combined you can build a concrete wall.

GREENE: Experience and youth.

DAVIS: Experience and youth.

GREENE: That's wonderful!

I've never been to other town meetings. How do you think the meeting in Greenville compared with those in larger cities?

DAVIS: Greenville is holding its own, and I would be correct if I told you that Greenville this year has surpassed us all.

GREENE: We don't have the Renaissance Center, we don't have the Sheraton Hilton, but this is home.

DAVIS: That's right, and it's much better than when we left here, because we weren't exposed to air conditioners. We used the hand fan. Really, we were making ourselves warmer by fanning.

GREENE: Mr. Davis, what has the Chicago Club done for Greenville?

DAVIS: Basically, we were an inspiration to you. When we first came back here with this affair, it seemed to catch fire right away. They have been growing and growing and I'm proud of that.

GREENE: Has the Club given anything to charities here in Greenville?

DAVIS: Oh, yes, that was our first project. The Sacred Heart School roof was falling in and we covered that and, of course, some of the members being from the public school, felt that we should give them something too, but I told them "Now let's not get carried away with this, because non-profit organizations are to do what is needed, not what you want, but what is needed." So, to satisfy a few of them we did give a donation to the music fund of Coleman High.

GREENE: Do you remember what that amounted to?

DAVIS: Now, our first donation was to Coleman High and that was \$250.00, and \$250.00 for Sacred Heart. The next year, if my memory serves me correctly, I know we gave Sacred Heart \$1,000.00, but Coleman High, being supported by the City didn't need what Sacred Heart did, so we only donated to them to the music fund.

GREENE: Has the Club done anything for Live Oak Cemetery?

DAVIS: Oh, yes. When the first appeal came out and, incidently, I was the instigator of that also. I talked with Mr. Levi Chapple and told him the need of the cemetery, and the facilities that go with the cemetery. We gave individual donations, our president, Mr. Walter Gardner, showed me figures the other day. This time we had over \$1,000.00 to give them.

GREENE: For this year?

DAVIS: For this year.

GREENE: Well, I hear that something is brewing for Brent Center. Do you know anything about that?

DAVIS: No.

GREENE: Donations for Brent Center?

DAVIS: No, I haven't heard that, as yet.

GREENE: I don't know which Club it is. A young man asked me the name of Brent Center, how to make the check.

Now where will the meeting be next year?

DAVIS: Well, we don't know. We all have our annual affairs,, but more emphasis was put on Greenville because this is Home Coming.

GREENE: You mean that each Club has its own Homecoming get-to-gether in its own town?

DAVIS: That's right. I would say we are serving in the same capacity as a National thing, although we haven't

got that yet. We do hope to achieve that in the Club life as having a National. We always recognize this that we always have local affairs, the same as we have national conventions, we always have state and city.

GREENE: Is this Club in Chicago and is this Club here, are they incorporated?

DAVIS: Yes, they are.

GREENE: The donation to these organizations is tax deductible?

DAVIS: This is somethat that you have to be careful about when you say tax deductible. A few people are familiar with this tax deduction business, but let's wait until we really donate something and these small things, we shouldn't put any emphasis on that right now, because in order to be tax deductible you have to have that federal number. In order to achieve that Federal number, you have to show how old your organization is and what you have been doing towards charity. This is when the Federal government gives you this tax deductible thing, but we wouldn't dare to think of going to the trouble if we give the Club \$10.00, if we want it deductible. If you want to make that a deductible contribution, just run your hand in your pocket and give that. Wait until you really get up there. You know, when you speak about giving something, you also have to be careful because you put yourself in a different bracket. When you show where you give more, you might end up in trouble.

GREENE: When you organized this Club, did you have any idea that it would mushroom to the degree that it has?

DAVIS: Well, let me put it this way, Mrs. Greene. I live in hopes, I'm never surprised at what doesn't happen, I'm surprised at what happens, and I had a goal and from that goal I would always say that we can reach out, but let us keep building first.

GREENE: Have you heard from the officials here whether any racial friction was encountered when such large groups of black people suddenly came to this community?

DAVIS: No, I haven't, but I can tell you that when we first came to Greenville, the young man who spoke to me in Chicago in February - we were at a funeral. He was a police officer from Washington, D. C., and he said, "Let's go down and meet the Chief of Police", he being a law official himself. I told him "okay". We went down the next morning and we told him that we were here and what our purpose was. At that time they had some marches, some misunderstanding and racial conflicts. The Chief said, "I'll advise my men not to bother strangers with little trifling things." I thought that was awful nice, and when we presented him with the membership roster, he thought it was very nice because he recognized some of the members parents and their roots in the making of Greenville. He bent over backwards to see that this type of thing didn't happen. Just before we left, we went back and thanked him and he asked us, "Have you encountered any conflict?"

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Of course, the answer was "No".

GREENE: That was two years ago when you first came down?

DAVIS: In 1970. You know our first meeting here seems to be hidden. We had a dance at the Elks on East Alexander. That was our first coming here, but then Greenville didn't have a Club at that time. Naturally, the people said, "Well, if they're doing that in Chicago" and coming all the way down "certainly we should do something too", and that's where it caught fire.

GREENE: You had better facilities this time.

DAVIS: Oh, yes.

GREENE: Where did you meet this time for your dances?

DAVIS: Well, we went to the VFW and the Elks. The VFW was larger and had facilities, cooler, which was very essential to us and made it real comfortable. We did not encounter the heat inside the buildings as we did three years ago when we were here.

GREENE: Mr. Davis, do these visitors charter buses or airplanes to come home?

DAVIS: We, most of us drive, and we had something like 40 and 80 to come on the planes from Chicago.

GREENE: How many from Chicago?

DAVIS: Forty-four were on the plane this time, but the last time it was eighty.

GREENE: Do they get cut rates when they come in

groups like that?

DAVIS: Oh, yes. There is always a ticket for two people all over forty, you get free rooms at the motels. Whatever airline you are dealing with, deals with the hotels. They have a bargain price if you deal with them once, and there's only one line coming here, and that's Southern. We hope in the near future some of the larger planes will start coming in here.

GREENE: What about the hotel rates here in Greenville?

DAVIS: Yes, well, any place, if you bargain with them as a group, you can always ask for a reduction, and all groups do get reductions, if it's handled right.

GREENE: Well, this has bloomed into not only a social thing but a money-making project too.

DAVIS: Well, we wouldn't say it's a money making proposition - not Club-wise.

GREENE: No.

DAVIS: But, as you know, all conventions, all gatherings means something to the city, and we like to see it like that because then you have something to fall back on, for if you are building a project you can always go to merchants and ask them for ads or donations in bringing these types of things to your city. They gladly help.

GREENE: Now, Mr. Davis, I know that you are in a hurry to leave the city. To save time I will get the date of your birth and the name of your parents and something about

your schooling from either your brother, Mr. Winchester Davis, or your cousin, Mrs. Bernice Bell.

DAVIS: Okay. That will be fine. Thank you very kindly. It was nice talking with you and I do hope that we will meet in the near future. I was glad that I was able to contribute something to my home town.

GREENE: You certainly have.

DAVIS: Thanks a lot.

GREENE: And I hope you have a good trip to Chicago.

(End of Interview)

FINAL by V.B.

August 5, 1978.

Note from Interviewer:

I secured the following information about Mr. Willie Davis from his brother, Mr. Winchester Davis:

He was born January 6, 1908 in Mayersville, Mississippi. Before her marriage his mother was Margaret Davis.

Fate had it that she married Willie Davis.

Mr. Davis graduated from Alcorn High School in 1928.

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