

An Interview with

MRS. BESSIE PEARL JORDAN

April 1, 1977

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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Interviewee: Bessie Pearl Jordan
Interviewer: Daisy 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 1, 1977. This is Daisy Greene interviewing Mrs. Bessie Pearl Jordan, widow of the late Lawrence Jonathan Jordan, J-o-n-a-t-h-a-n, Senior. Reverend Jordan was pastor of Mercy Seat Church. Her address is 346 East Alexander.

The place of your birth?

JORDAN: Leland, Mississippi.

GREENE: The date of your birth?

JORDAN: December 18, 1898.

GREENE: And your age?

JORDAN: Seventy-eight.

GREENE: You are a housewife, Mrs. Jordan?

JORDAN: Yes.

GREENE: The place of the interview is at 346 East Alexander Street, Mrs. Jordan's home. I have talked to quite a few people, Mrs. Jordan, about Lucy Webb. Most of them didn't seem to know too much about the details of her life. You know more about Mrs. Webb than anyone I've talked to. Won't you tell me something about her as you remember her?

JORDAN: As I remember Mrs. Webb she was a straightforward believer in helping children live a better life, a clean life. She taught them how to wear their clothes right, keep their shoes right and she would see that their hair was combed every morning as they entered school.

GREENE: Now, Mrs. Jordan, let's stop just a second. Will you please tell me what Mrs. Webb did if children came to school without their hair combed?

JORDAN: She checked them when they marched in. She would tell those with uncombed hair to go to a room to have their hair combed by another girl and me, I can't think of her name right now. We combed their hair and the next morning, maybe, we wouldn't have quite as many to comb.

GREENE: Did they object to having their hair combed?

JORDAN: No, because Mrs. Webb said, "If you don't want us to comb your hair, get your mother or someone big enough to comb it. If you don't it will be combed here. Have your face washed or some girl will wash your face." If the little boys didn't wear ties, she would make a tie out of a string.

GREENE: Did the parents object to that?

JORDAN: No, ma'am.

GREENE: They didn't come around and set her out?

JORDAN: No, they did not.

GREENE: They would blast the teacher out now, wouldn't they?

JORDAN: They surely would. They say... that's what they tell me. But she would see to it, and everybody would come trying to do better for the next time, I never saw any mud on her shoes-dry mud. She didn't allow the children to come in with dry mud on their shoes. They'd have to get

it off. She'd tell them to put some blacking on their shoes if they didn't have any polish.

GREENE: What kind of blacking?

JORDAN: Get some off the pots or something. She said we'll have to teach them that they have to go clean.

GREENE: In other words, she emphasized cleanliness as well as book learning, that's what you call it.

JORDAN: She surely did.

GREENE: When I was here the other day you were telling me something about lining up in front at the school.

JORDAN: When she rang that bell, they lined up in front of the school, everybody got in the right line for your grade and then marched in. If you were late, you got a lick for each minute you were late. She never stopped the line, she kept going.

GREENE: Well, I have heard that little girls wore aprons to school to this particular school. Is that true?

JORDAN: Well, they wore them on Friday. That was... industrial day I guess you'd call it. They wore aprons which had little compartments for thread, needles and whatever you were going to sew on that day. There was a place for a face rag and soap in another compartment. We would always wash our hands before sewing. When we finished, we would fold up the work, and a monitor to take it up and set it in a certain place. If you didn't have any sewing to do, she would have you go outside and find the marks on the building and wash them off,

This was to keep the school in a decent condition.

GREENE: This was the new school of which she was very proud, a new frame building. Tell me what was the name of that school?

JORDAN: This was named the Yeager Industrial School and I think it was named for Mayor Yeager. They named the school after him.

GREENE: Where was it?

JORDAN: It was on Cleveland and Union street.

GREENE: Later the name was changed.

JORDAN: They changed the name to Number 7, but I really don't know why.

GREENE: You were telling me something about Number 2 being too small. That's why they built it, Yeager School.

JORDAN: Oh, Number 2 was on Nelson and Steele's Alley and Theobald Street. The town was growing larger, I guess, and there were more children in town. All children living east of Edison Street would attend the new school they were building.

GREENE: I notice the school was called Yeager Industrial School and you said something about the children wearing aprons on Friday, which was industrial day. There was a school in town called Greenville Industrial College, wasn't it?

JORDAN: Not at that time.

GREENE: No, not at that time but later. I think

that was a carry over from Booker T. Washington who emphasized teaching children to use their hands. Mrs. Webb attended Tuskegee in the summer. She knew Booker T. Washington personally. Did you see the little handicraft she made from the pine needles? She had a cabinet in the hall where she had an exhibit.

JORDAN: I can't remember about the needles, the cabinet and things like that, but she did have the pine needles and things like that.

GREENE: She taught needle work once a week.

JORDAN: She did, once a week.

GREENE: Mrs. Webb was a great lover of flowers. Did the children give her any trouble about plants around school?

JORDAN: No, they did not. She didn't have to worry about the flowers then. They stayed off the flowers and she had sticks around the trees when they were growing up.

GREENE: You mean they knew better!

JORDAN: There was a girls' side and a boys' side.

GREENE: They had a girls' side and a boys' side?

JORDAN: That's right and they knew they'd better stay on the side they belonged.

GREENE: I don't know whether they have girls and boys separated in schools on the playgrounds now or not. I wonder if they have pupils lining up in schools? Coming in by a bell.

JORDAN: I don't know.

GREENE: Was she a good disciplinarian?

JORDAN: She was. She really was. In the morning we had assembly and devotion. We had a reading of the scripture and prayer. She would always give a little talk. She said that the first thing in the morning you should thank God for being able to make one-half hour without sinning, or thinking about sinning, and so on. That's one thing I've kept in memory of her. She had a school yell, but I can't remember... the yell we had for this school. She was really proud of her school. She kept the grounds clean, no paper on the ground, everybody picked up their paper and kept it clean. It was decent to look at as you passed by.

GREENE: I taught with Mrs. Webb two or three years but I don't remember too much about her. One of the things was the fact that she was a very stern woman, a thorough woman, who spoke the truth, the unvarnished truth, and she didn't bite her lip about anything. For that reason she didn't have too many friends; most people don't like for you to tell them the truth, but she was a very thorough teacher. She was certainly not a deceitful woman. I remember she told me that she was going to retire at the end of the year and that I shouldn't tell anyone because she didn't want fanfare about her retirement. She was just a plain woman. You remember her that way?

JORDAN: I remember her as a... I just loved to look at her because she dressed like I thought teachers should

dress. She dressed neat and had her hair combed, and you had to have yours combed. She would have her clothes clean. I really wish we had more teachers like that, to look after the children. Some didn't get it in the homes then, and some are not getting it now.

GREENE: I see. Now, Mrs. Jordan, how are you connected with Mercy Seat Church? It's the Mercy Seat Baptist Church, isn't it?

JORDAN: The Mercy Seat Missionary Baptist Church. I am trying to think of the year we joined - the year we came to Greenville. Mrs. Bolden was married to Reverend Bolden and after she came ---

GREENE: What was Mrs. Bolden's full name?

JORDAN: Mathilda Virginia Carter. At first it was Mathilda Virginia Lumpkins, and after Mr. Lumpkins died, she married Mr. Carter and he taught with her out there at Stoneville for two years and he died. Then she married Reverend Bolden and moved to Greenville.

GREENE: Was he Pastor of Mercy Seat Baptist Church when she married him?

JORDAN: That's right. He was Pastor until 1933.

GREENE: Was he the first Pastor of the church?

JORDAN: No. He was the second Pastor. They had one Pastor before him. Reverend Jordan, Senior, my husband, was the third.

GREENE: Where was the church when this first Pastor

founded it? Where did they worship?

JORDAN: They worshiped in almost the very same spot, but I wouldn't know anything about that. I only remember Reverend Bolden as the second Pastor, and my husband the third.

GREENE: Evidently you knew the Mercy Seat Baptist Church before Reverend Jordan, your husband, did.

JORDAN: Yes, I did.

GREENE: Now, you were telling me about the relationship between Mrs. Bolden and your mother.

JORDAN: They were real good friends when Mrs. Bolden lived in Stoneville and my mother lived out from Leland. We went to school to Mrs. Bolden... I can't think of the name of the church. It was the church we went to school in.

GREENE: At Leland?

JORDAN: No, at Stoneville. We went to Leland first and then went to Stoneville next, and then after that we moved here before she did. After she moved here then the connections... they got back together again, and my mother always called her Mathilda.

GREENE: So, it is because of this Mrs. Bolden that your mother joined Mercy Seat Baptist Church.

JORDAN: That's right.

GREENE: Now, do you remember how long your husband was Pastor at Mercy Seat Baptist Church?

JORDAN: He pastored from 1933 in November until 1937, November first.

GREENE: He died at his post of duty, I understand.

JORDAN: That's right.

GREENE: I'm looking at this lovely book called The Scribe covering the years from 1885 to 1930. There is a passage that says: "On April 1, 1906 the frame structure on Poplar Street was sold to a colored congregation and now stands on Redbud Street where the Mercy Seat Baptist now assemble." It seems that the church that was sold to Mercy Seat Baptist Church originally belonged to the white First Baptist church.

JORDAN: That's right.

GREENE: This is a valuable book, and the picture here is very much like Mercy Seat is today. Of course, Mercy Seat had been veneered, and the interior has been improved, but the design of the windows is still the same.

JORDAN: That's right.

GREENE: Now, coming back to your husband... who succeeded him as Pastor of the church?

JORDAN: His son, Doctor Royal Jordan.

GREENE: Now, this Royal L. Jordan, besides being a Minister, is a dentist practicing on East Alexander Street now? We were quite happy when he came back from Gary, Indiana.

JORDAN: That was Fort Wayne, Indiana.

GREENE: That's where he was, at Fort Wayne. Is there anything else you wanted to say?

JORDAN: No. I just want to say I was happy when he returned and was happy to see him carrying on at his father's homecoming. I hope he can continue to do a good work.

GREENE: Before we go further, Mrs. Jordan, we forgot to say something about Mrs. Manning. Who was she?

JORDAN: Mrs. M. V. Manning.

GREENE: Who was she?

JORDAN: She was the daughter of Mrs. M. D. Bolden. When I knew her she was quite a young lady. We were going to school there in Stoneville. She left going off to school. We met again when we moved here. She joined the staff at the Yeager School.

GREENE: So, she taught with Mrs. Webb at Yeager School, or Number Seven as it is sometimes called?

JORDAN: It was Yeager at that time.

GREENE: Is this the same Manning for whom Manning Elementary School was named?

JORDAN: Yes, ma'am.

GREENE: She was one of the venerable teachers in the Greenville Public School System for many years.

JORDAN: and a member of the Mercy Seat M. B. Church and a member of the choir, of which I was made President in 1927 after the high water.

GREENE: And you are still President?

JORDAN: Yes.

GREENE: We shouldn't forget to add this...
Is there anything in Greenville in honor of Mrs. Lucy Webb?
Any building?

JORDAN: Yes, it is. Lucy Webb down on the South
end. It is named in honor of Mrs. Webb.

GREENE: The only thing I remember about that is
that the school was not built on the site that she loved. She
loved every leaf and every branch on those trees. She loved
that ground.

JORDAN: That's right, because we planted those
trees around that building.

GREENE: By the way, didn't you tell me that you
entered Yeager Industrial School the first year it was built?

JORDAN: Yes, but I can't remember the year it
opened.

GREENE: We'll have to try to find that date.

JORDAN: I was right there.

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GREENE: Mrs. Jordan, tell me about your fiftieth
Anniversary. I remember seeing it in the paper, saying to
myself, "I must go to this. I've known Bessie a long time." Then
I forgot it.

JORDAN: Shame on you.

GREENE: That's the reason I didn't come, so will
you please tell me about that Anniversary?

JORDAN: Well, it was another happy day of my life.

I was hoping and praying that we would live to see our fiftieth anniversary, and we did, all the children coming home and bringing their children with them. We had a wonderful time with the family and friends. At the end of the evening they asked us to come and sit in special chairs; I wondered why. They'd already given us a lot of gifts. When we were seated, they gave us a check for One Thousand Dollars. You know that we were very happy then.

GREENE: That was the climax.

JORDAN: They gave me a mother's ring. That was the climax.

GREENE: A mother's ring? What's that?

JORDAN: From all the children.

GREENE: Oh, each child was represented? How many stones, three, four, five or six? I see, a stone for each child. They are emeralds and pearls. How beautiful! What a beautiful tribute! I know you don't want to lose it.

JORDAN: I surely don't. I don't pull it off. I may lose a set, but I keep it on. I wear it continuously.

GREENE: Were there many friends present for the anniversary?

JORDAN: Yes and some of the family from Jackson too.

GREENE: In other words, they did better than I did, they remembered.

JORDAN: They remembered. That's right.

GREENE: I certainly did intend to come. You said your children were here. How many children do you have?

JORDAN: I had five children. Their wives were here with them.

GREENE: How many grands do you have?

JORDAN: Well, I have twenty-eight grandchildren.

GREENE: How many great-grands?

JORDAN: Thirteen great-grands.

GREENE: Well, that should have been quite a celebration.

JORDAN: Of course, all the great-grands were not here because some hadn't come yet.

GREENE: They weren't born.

How long did your husband live after the celebration?

JORDAN: Three years, I think. We managed to live together fifty-three years.

GREENE: Did you give me the date of that anniversary? It was in 1967, October the fourth. I don't think we have recorded it here.

JORDAN: Didn't we?

GREENE: Now where is L. J. Jordan, that's your oldest child?

JORDAN: Yes, that's right... my oldest child. He has retired from the postal service, but he is carrying on in the ministry.

GREENE: And he's been recently in Intensive Care

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at Delta Medical Center, but I see him walking around now. He seems to be doing very well.

JORDAN: Yes.

GREENE: Your next child was named Bessie?

JORDAN: Bessie Lou.

GREENE: Yes, she's named for you.

JORDAN: She's just out of the hospital but is very much improved. She's married to...

GREENE:... the contractor, Floyd Johnson?

JORDAN: Floyd Johnson.

GREENE: Wasn't she organist for the church?

JORDAN: She's still with them.

GREENE: Then, you had another son that I don't know very well, James.

JORDAN: James Jordan. He's in Detroit and he works with the Postal Service.

GREENE: And Doris whom I knew very well.

JORDAN: Doris, that's right. She was in the church until 1950. She has passed.

GREENE: Royal...

JORDAN: He is pastoring the church where his father pastored. He is a dentist too.

GREENE: And your latest is Carl?

JORDAN: Carl. He's a Minister and he is also in the postal service,

GREENE: Well, you have three boys to follow in

your husband's footsteps?

JORDAN: I have three.

GREENE: And how does that make you feel?

JORDAN: Very good, very good.

GREENE: Now let's talk about today's living, Mrs. Jordan. What are some of the good points in today's living? I know there are a lot of dark spots in the world.

JORDAN: Well, we take them along with the good and try not to complain about the bad spots. We are happy because we are able to get about better because of the transportation.

GREENE: Do you fly? Are you afraid of flying?

JORDAN: No, I'm not afraid of flying. I fly when I travel. Of course, I'm a little reluctant about going by myself now, but other than that I enjoy flying. I enjoy the different things that we have to help us do the things we have to do... the washing machines, the dryers and all those things. Where it used to be hard for us to do the work, we are able to do it with ease now.

GREENE: The rub board and the black skillet are gone.

JORDAN: That's right.

GREENE: What about the pleasures in your home?

JORDAN: Well, we have the television to watch, and I've been enjoying that very much. We have the radio to get different programs.. to get the news on. Sometimes

the news is not quite like we'd have it, but we enjoy it just the same.

GREENE: It's news... just news.

JORDAN: Yes.

GREENE: Well, those are some of the things you like about today's living, what about some of the things you resent about today's living?

JORDAN: Well, some things you miss about today's living.. In fact, as I said, I'm trying to adjust to the things that I like and the things that I dislike. There are some ways we dress, some things we do, some things that happen in church that I don't like. But the one thing I dislike most is, and I hope we will one day stop doing this, chewing gum in church. I think... In fact, I was taught when I was coming along that it was a sin against the Holy Spirit to chew gum in church.

(End of Interview)

(Transcribed by Vivian Broom)

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March 1, 1978

Interviewed by
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Mississippi
Department of Archives and History
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Oral History Project:
Greenville and Vicinity

GREENE: This is March 1, 1978. Daisy Greene interviewing Mrs. Bessie Jordan, whose address is 346 East Alexander Street, Greenville, Mississippi.

Mrs. Jordan, give me your maiden name.

JORDAN: Bessie Pearl Phillips.

GREENE: What was your mother's maiden name?

JORDAN: Louvenia Dembo.

GREENE: How does she spell that?

JORDAN: D-E-M-B-O.

GREENE: What was your father's name?

JORDAN: Osborne Phillips.

GREENE: Are you a registered voter?

JORDAN: I am.

GREENE: Did you have any trouble when you went to register?

JORDAN: No, I didn't have any trouble.

GREENE: Have you ever served on a jury?

JORDAN: No, I have never served on a jury.

GREENE: Give me the date and the place of your birth.

JORDAN: The place was Leland, Mississippi, and the date was December 16, 1898.

GREENE: Now, Mrs. Jordan, let's talk about the Kosciusko School. Not until recently did I know that Reverend Jordan ever taught school. Where did the school come from?

JORDAN: From Kosciusko, Mississippi. Reverend A. B. Bolden and Reverend L. W. Lindsey thought the Delta needed a college here for the boys and girls, and they somehow got together and voted - whoever it was - that they would bring the school here in the Delta.

GREENE: Now, just what position did Rev. A. B. Bolden hold?

JORDAN: He was President of the Baptist Convention.

GREENE: When the school was moved here from Kosciusko, Mississippi, where was it located in Greenville?

JORDAN: It was first located on Nelson Street, where James Carter's Pressing Shop is now. There was a hall there called the Royal Palm Hall; and they stayed there a few months - I don't think they stayed there too long - and then it was moved to the corner of Nelson and Redbud Street.

GREENE: Now, who were some of the teachers who came here when the school was moved to Greenville?

JORDAN: Professor P. H. Thompson and Mrs. Lyna Tanner, Reverend L. J. Jordan and Mrs. Cora Holmes. She was a Home Economics teacher, I think, and Mrs. Lacre, minister of music.

GREENE: Who was the principal?

JORDAN: Professor P. H. Thompson.

GREENE: Were there boarding students when the school was on Redbud Street?

JORDAN: Yes, they had boarding students there.

GREENE: What provisions - where did they stay?

JORDAN: They had a two-story building, and they used that - made compartments for rooms.

GREENE: Do you have any idea what the tuition was?

JORDAN: No, I don't know about tuition. The school was supported by tuition and contributions of the churches from the convention.

GREENE: Mrs. Jordan, when did your husband come to town with the school?

JORDAN: It was in 1915, the same year that Booker T. Washington died. That's how I remember. He would always laugh and say, "I came to Greenville the same year that Booker T. Washington died."

GREENE: And you didn't know him until he came to Greenville with the school?

JORDAN: Not until he came here to teach at the Kosciusko School. After staying on Redbud and Nelson a while, more room was needed, and they found a place over on Carter Street - a two-story building with two small houses with it. The school was moved and stayed there until it burned. That was shortly after we married.

GREENE: Did you live on Carter when you married Reverend Jordan?

JORDAN: Yes, I did. We married in 1917, and stayed over there until the school burned. After that, they had to

make other provisions, and they built it out in Brown's Addition.

GREENE: You said something about Paducah?

JORDAN: Oh, yes. They started to build out there. They had planned, but it wasn't convenient enough and they wanted to get a little closer. Dr. E. P. Brown, the first black doctor in Greenville, had bricks and lumber out on the grounds in Brown's Addition. Somehow they got together and bought the bricks and materials from him. They bought 22 lots from him. The school is still out there now. When the school was moved to Brown's Addition, the name was changed to Greenville Industrial College. MACE (Mississippi Action for Community Education) rents the upper story. The kindergarden occupies the first floor.

GREENE: Do you know the size of the lots in Brown's Addition?

JORDAN: I don't know, but there are 22 lots.

GREENE: It occupies the block between Spruce and Alexander.

JORDAN: It's a big place.

GREENE: Now, when the school was in its prime, did it still have boarding students?

JORDAN: Yes, they did. They had boarding students from many different places - from Winterville, Canton, and so many places I can't remember off-hand, but they had boarding

students, and had a number of teachers. The music department was well organized. The choir sang at different churches.

GREENE: Now, Mrs. Molly Phillips was Principal of the school, wasn't she?

JORDAN: She was on the faculty.

GREENE: You said she did a good service for unwed mothers?

JORDAN: She would help them out and take them in. They weren't so anxious to get back to school years ago as they are now. They didn't want to get back with the other girls, and they would be glad to go back to school with Mrs. Phillips after they had been mothers, to keep from going back to the public school; so she took in quite a few and helped them finish their high school education, and helped them on their way. They got diplomas and everything.

GREENE: When do you think enrollment began to decline?

JORDAN: Well, it was doing pretty good until after - I don't know how this happened - but after schools started to let pregnant girls come back to school, and stay there until they would get ready, enrollment began to drop. They were different mothers then. I guess they decided that since they could have the babies and stay in school, there was no need to go to a pay school. Greenville Industrial College closed almost abruptly when other schools started taking girls in school and letting them go throughout their

time and letting them come back. And so now Mrs. Phillips doesn't have any of the larger children. All she has is little fellows.

GREENE: Now, when the school was in its prime, how far did it go?

JORDAN: High school?

GREENE: Yes.

JORDAN: Through high school.

GREENE: What's in the building now?

JORDAN: Only the little kindergarten; that's all Mrs. Phillips has. She has twenty or twenty-five, and sometimes I imagine there are more, but most of the time there are twenty or twenty-five children.

GREENE: Is the building rented for any other purpose?

JORDAN: I wouldn't know about that. I think MACE rents it - the school - and then it is rented out for programs and things like that - but not where they teach.

GREENE: Do you know who constructed the building?

JORDAN: I did know, but I can't remember.

(End of Interview)

(Transcribed by Alice C. Nagel)

FINAL
4/19/78
Alice C. Nagel

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Phillips, Osborne, father, 1

Redbud Street, mentioned, 2, 3

Royal Palm Hall, 2

Spruce (Street), mentioned, 4

Thompson, P. H. (Professor), principal, teacher, Kosciusko School, 2

Washington, Booker T., 3

Winterville (Miss.), mentioned, 4