

JACKSON STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

THE FARISH STREET HISTORIC DISTRICT PROJECT

BUSINESSMAN IN THE HISTORIC DISTRICT

O. H. 78.07

GALE FOSTER

Interviewed
by

Louella Robinson

on

June 20, 1978

JACKSON STATE COLLEGE
Jackson, Mississippi

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

INTERVIEWER AGREEMENT

I, Louella Robinson, in view of the
(Interviewer, please print)

historical and scholarly value of the information contained in the
interview with Dale Foster, knowingly and
(Interviewee, please print)

voluntarily permit Jackson State College, Jackson the full use of this
information, and hereby grant and assign to Jackson State College,
Jackson all rights of every kind whatever pertaining to this information,
whether or not such rights are now known, recognized or contemplated.

Louella Robinson
Interviewer (signature)

OH. 78. 07
Interview Number

6/20/78
Date

JACKSON STATE UNIVERSITY

Jackson, Mississippi

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

INTERVIEW AGREEMENT

You have been asked for information to be used in connection with the Oral History Program at Jackson State University, Jackson, Mississippi. The purpose of this program is to gather and preserve information for historical and scholarly use.

A tape recording of your interview will be made by the interviewer and a typescript of the tape will be made and submitted to you for editing. The final retyped and edited transcript, together with the tape of the interview will then be placed in the oral history collection at Jackson State University, Jackson, Mississippi. Other institutions or persons may obtain a copy. These materials may be used for purposes of research, for instructional use, for publication, or for other related purposes.

I, Stale Foster have read the above, and in view of the historical and scholarly value of this information, and in return for a final typed copy of the transcript, I knowingly and voluntarily permit Jackson State University, Jackson, Mississippi, the full use of this information. I hereby grant and assign all my rights of every kind whatever pertaining to this information, whether or not such rights are now known, recognized, or contemplated, to Jackson State University, Jackson, Mississippi.

Stale Foster
Interviewee's Signature

June 8, 1895
Interviewee's Date of Birth

11-28-82
Date Agreement Signed

OH 78.07
Oral History Number Assigned

INTRODUCTION

Mr. Gale Foster, was born July 8, 1895 in Madison County. He attended Jackson College during 1912 and 1913. He is the owner of City Barber, Beauty and Tailor Shop.

In this interview Mr. Foster discusses in detail why he entered into the barber, beauty, and tailoring shop business. He also gives recollections of Farish Street in 1919. Further, he tells whys he preferred white customers to blacks.

He advises today's blacks to get an education before they start to operate any type of business. Finally he explains why it is a bad investment to let people borrow money.

INTERVIEWEE: Gale Foster
INTERVIEWER: Louella Robinson
DATE OF INTERVIEW: June 20, 1978
O.H. 78.07

Robinson: Gale Foster, is that your real name?

Foster: Yes.

Robinson: What is your age?

Foster: I am eighty-three years old. I was born in 1895.

Robinson: Where were you born?

Foster: Madison County.

Robinson: Did you live there a large part of your life?

Foster: I came to Jackson in 1912. I went to Jackson College in 1912 and 1913.

Robinson: How many brothers do you have?

Foster: Five.

Robinson: Are you married?

Foster: Yes.

Robinson: What are the things you like to do most?

Foster: The thing I like to do most is sit down.

Robinson: Are you a religious man?

Foster: Yes.

Robinson: What are some of the holidays that you celebrate most?

Foster: Christmas, Mother's Day, and Father's Day.

Robinson: What is the name of your business?

Foster: City Barber Shop, City Beauty Shop, and City Tailor Shop. I have all three of these together.

Robinson: You own all these?

Foster: Yes.

Robinson: Tell me something about the early history of your business?

Foster: In 1919 I had a pressing shop in the Royal Hotel. I left the Royal Hotel and came to Farish Street. I sewed for S. P. McRaes and McClinton, all the big stores. The only thing I do now is alterations.

Robinson: What do you do for them?

Foster: Alterations.

Robinson: How long have you been doing that?

Foster: I have worked for forty-five years and have never missed a day.

Robinson: Who was the first owner of your business?

Foster: I was the first owner.

Robinson: How did it get started?

Foster: I use to be a hotel manager. The hotel had a big laundry room and when the guest would break their buttons or tear their suits, they use to send them to me to fix. I left the hotel and started a shop in the Royal Hotel. I was at Edward's house before I moved there. I moved from the Royal Hotel to Farish Street in 1919.

Robinson: How is business today?

Foster: Alright.

Robinson: Did you say that the first location was on Capitol Street?

Foster: No. The first location was at 127 North Farish Street. It is now located at 600 North Farish Street.

Robinson: Why did you move?

Foster: They tore down all those buildings and put up the Federal building there.

Robinson: How long has it been since you moved?

Foster: They said it has been four years. I was on the committee at Jackson College when they were going around fixing up old houses.

Robinson: How much did it take for you to get started in your business?

Foster: I guess about fifty or seventy-five dollars. I got married in 1915 for the first time.

Robinson: If you had to do it all over again, how much money would it take?

Foster: It would take about ten thousand dollars or more.

Robinson: What main reason did you enter this particular business?

Foster: I was in the hotel and as a Christian you can't see God's face and work in a hotel. So, I came out and joined something that I was already experienced in. I just took it and went on from there.

Robinson: Did you enjoy it?

Foster: Sure. Nobody is going to work for forty-five years and not enjoy it.

Robinson: Have you made any additions to your building?

Foster: I bought the building since I have been here.

Robinson: How many parts did you operate in the beginning?

Foster: I had the beauty shop, tailor shop, and the hair dressers shop.

Robinson: Do you own the barber and beauty shop?

Foster: I owned everything but the building. I own the building now.

Robinson: What made you enter into the beauty and barber business?

Foster: I went into the beauty business because of my wife. She had gone to school and learned the trade so I fixed her up with her own business.

Robinson: What about the barber shop?

Foster: I took the barber shop over because Conic moved out and I took over the Barber College. I already had the beauty shop so I kept it too.

I have raised two sets of children. I have children that are sixty years old.

Robinson: How many children do you have?

Foster: Four, two girls and two boys. The oldest son is sixty, the baby boy is thirty-three, one girl is thirty-five and the little girl is twelve or fourteen.

Robinson: Why'd you choose Farish Street for your location?

Foster: I didn't altogether choose it. I was in a white district and you just get tired of looking at nobody but white folks.

Robinson: That's how you started?

Foster: All my customers were white. I thought if I wanted to use the colored people that I would have to moved out of the hotel.

Robinson: Do you have any partners?

Foster: No.

Robinson: You don't believe in partners? What about today?

Foster: I don't have any partners, nobody but my wife.

Robinson: Was it hard for a black man to get started without a partner?

Foster: Back in those days all my customers were white. It was hard if you had to get among the colored people. I didn't fool with poor people. Colored people are just like a crab, if you put a lot of crabs in a barrel when one gets up to the top, the others would pull you down. All my customers were rich white people. Right now I can get on the telephone and call Mrs. McClain, she is a millionaire, I can tell her that I am sick and in an hour or two she will be here.

Robinson: Do you think a black person is a bad risk?

Foster: Ain't no risk. I went to school where you are now. Hoover and Mrs. Packer was over the girls and Danton was over the boys. This was about fifty years ago. Last time that I went out there it had changed.

Robinson: Jackson State?

Foster: The atmosphere, you know how the people act out there.

Robinson: How many people do you have working for you?

Foster: I have four barbers, one beautician, and five shine boys.

Robinson: How much did a shine cost in those days?

FOSTER, Gale

Foster: Ten cent.

Robinson: What about today?

Foster: Fifty cent.

Robinson: How much did a regular hair do cost when you first started?

Foster: It was just as much then as it is now. I'll ask my wife.

Robinson: Did you just open it for her?

Foster: Yes. I didn't ever go up there.

Robinson: What are some qualifications a person needs to work in your business?

Foster: They have to go to college and have a license. When I came along I didn't have to go to school, but I did have to have a license.

Robinson: You picked up your trade from your mother, right?

Foster: Yes. My mother sewed for the people in the country. She made dresses, boys pants and shirts.

Robinson: You usually see little girls doing this.

Foster: Yes. It was sixteen of us and I was my mother's pet. After I got grown I set her free. She didn't have to do anything. Anything she wanted she came here and got it.

Robinson: Do you have any problems of vandalism?

Foster: No, I don't. The only thing like that is that the people working for the city would move things that you didn't want them to. People would steal timber off your land. I have had trouble with people breaking in, but they didn't steal anything of mines. They would always take something that belonged to the barbers.

Robinson: Do you have insurance?

Foster: No, I didn't. I just rented the department for them to work in. If they didn't have insurances, it was their business. I have the building insured, but not individual insurances.

Robinson: Do you have both black and white customers?

Foster: When I first started I would allow the barbers to cut white men's hair but not the white women's hair. I have never had white women as customers.

Robinson: Why not?

Foster: They can do it now, but back in those days you couldn't be that fresh and wait on white girls. They weren't allowed in there. White women and colored men have always been free to do what they wanted to do and go where they wanted to go. I remember the time my girl and I were walking and we would meet a white boy and girl, we would have to get off the sidewalk.

Robinson: You remember that far back?

Foster: Sure. I remember when this wasn't anything but a dirt road. (Pearl Street)

Robinson: Were you living here then?

Foster: I built this house in 1917.

Robinson: This is the only place you have lived?

Foster: This is the only place I built here in Jackson. I have lived more places before I got married. I lived at 517 West Pearl. I have been here since 1917. When I first got married I lived near Clifton Street. I didn't stay anywhere long because I was young and dissatisfied.

Robinson: Can you remember how Farish Street looked when businesses were first established?

Foster: In 1912 the Farish Street area was made out of pine blocks, something like bricks. Amite and Farish was where the wagons drove. If it rained the blocks would swell up and would you have to go around them.

Robinson: Would that harm the businesses?

Foster: No. We had one colored bank between Pearl and Capitol Street.

Robinson: Do you remember the name of it?

Foster: No. It went broke, but luckily I didn't have but seventy-five cents in it. I moved my money over to Merchant Bank on State Street, but my other money was at Merchant Bank on North State Street.

Robinson: Do you remember any black owned businesses.

Foster: Sure. Lawyer Moon was down there, he is dead now. Proctor had a cafe. Campbell fixed shoes and Lathan Funeral Home was down there.

Robinson: Do you remember the Edward Lee Hotel? Was it there then?

Foster: It wasn't there then. Colored people didn't have a hotel.

Robinson: Has your business always been called Foster's?

Foster: City Tailor.

Robinson: If you had to do it all over again, would you go into the same business?

Foster: Yes.

Robinson: You would?

Foster: I have lived a happy life. Back in those days when it would have been hard, I had white customers such as the Westbrooks, Crafts, Greens, and the McClains. The way that I would do it is when the first of the month came I would put a bill on each one of them. They would just make me out a check, but they didn't put the amount on it. I wouldn't give them the same bill each month. If they paid a large bill this month they would get a small bill the next month. I never lost one of them. The only time I lost one is when she died. Mrs. McClain died about four or five years ago. My car was the third one in line at her funeral.

Robinson: Do you have any future plans for additions?

Foster: No.

Robinson: Have you made any additions recently?

Foster: No.

Robinson: How much would you say your business is worth today?

Foster: I had to pay \$640.00 for income taxes.

Robinson: How long do you plan to be in business?

Foster: I'll be here until I die.

Robinson: Are you planning on retiring?

Foster: No. If I stop and sit down, that's it. If I go on, I'll feel alright.

Robinson: Who is working when you are not?

Foster: My wife. She sews for Jackson College Band. If I feel like it I do it.

Robinson: What do you fix?

Foster: Anything, lining, cut-off, zippers, etc.

Robinson: Who set the rates?

Foster: I do.

Robinson: How much does a zipper cost?

Foster: A zipper cost \$2.00.

Robinson: Do you buy the zipper?

Foster: If they have their own I just charge \$1.00.

Robinson: Do you have a machine or do you do the work by hand?

Foster: Work that has to be done by hand I do it, but all I can get around doing by hand I sew it by machine.

Robinson: What about when you first got started?

Foster: I had one machine.

Robinson: Do you think it was easier than it is now?

Foster: Yes.

Robinson: What if you messed up, would you take it apart?

Foster: It would take time. If you didn't want to wait, you could take it with you. I don't work for anyone, I work for myself. If I don't feel like doing it I'll lay it aside until I feel like doing it.

Robinson: How many days does it usually take to finish an alteration?

Foster: Not even a day. I can cut off a pair of pants in 5 minutes and hand them back to you. In 15 or 20 minutes I can put in a zipper. I can make a suit in a couple of days, but I am not going to make anymore.

Robinson: Did you make a lot of suits when you first started?

Foster: Yes.

Robinson: What about today?

Foster: No.

Robinson: Why not?

Foster: I don't want to. When you get grown you don't want to be worried about putting things together. If you want a suit made, I will take your measurements and send it to the tailor shop in New Orleans.

Robinson: Are your customers men or women?

Foster: Men.

Robinson: Do you like sewing for men instead of women?

Foster: Yes.

Robinson: Why?

Foster: They are just harder to suit. I had a job today and the fellow told me what he wanted. I measured him and told him that it was not going to be right. I was glad it wasn't. He was telling me how to fix. If he knew how to do it, why didn't he do it himself. So, when he came back he said, "Mr. Foster, I wish I hadn't said anything." I told him that it was going to cost for me to take it loose and fix it again.

Robinson: If you do it over, will they have to pay again?

Foster: If they get it fixed again they have to pay. If I fix it like you say and it isn't right that's your business.

Robinson: Why do you think Farish Street area has begun to run down?

Foster: It's not running down, things have changed so fast. A white man can eat and go where he wants to go and the colored man can do the same. Colored people don't have money like the white people. White people have the best credit. You don't have many colored people that can walk into a bank and borrow \$1,000.00 without having five or six signatures. It's just the strength that white people have over colored people. The next fifteen or twenty years it will be sort of equal like. Colored people have just as nice of businesses as the whites, they need money to protect what they got.

Robinson: What advice would you give a young black that is trying to get started:

Foster: I think you must be supported from both sides, white and colored. It hasn't been long since colored people started going into white places. Whites have got the advantage. They can buy big sums and colored people buy only one or two dollars worth, things aren't changing. If we can get young people to get an education things stand a chance of changing.

A long time ago it wasn't what you could do, but it was who knew you. If a rich man walked up and said give this man a job, he's a good nigger whether he knew the job or not he would learn to do that particular job. If you get a job today you have to get it by knowing the job.

Robinson: I got one man down there now that owes me \$900. He was working for me. He got into some kind of trouble and the FBI grabbed him. I told them I would be responsible for him. On the first they sent me a bill for \$500, I went on and paid it.

Robinson: Not any questions asked?

Foster: No, he didn't know anyone and he was working for me.

Robinson: He couldn't get the \$500 from anyone else?

Foster: He was suppose to get a big sum of money from the government that week, but when the money came, I didn't see him anymore. He went and did something else.

Robinson: Is he still around?

Foster: He's somewhere in the 500 block, selling peanuts and skins. It might be in the 600 block. I sent for him but he didn't come. If he comes I won't fuss, I'll just tell him I am ashamed of him.

Robinson: How long ago was this?

Foster: About seven or eight years ago.

Foster, Gales
O.H. 78.07

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