



JACKSON STATE UNIVERSITY

1400 J. R. LYNCH STREET
P. O. Box 17008

JACKSON, MISSISSIPPI 39217-0108

MARGARET WALKER ALEXANDER
NATIONAL RESEARCH CENTER

PHONE: (601) 979-2055
FAX: (601) 979-5929

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

INTERVIEWEE AGREEMENT

You have been asked for information to be used in connection with historic African-American buildings in Mississippi. The purpose of this program is to gather and preserve information for historical and scholarly use.

The interviewer has made a tape recording of your interview. If Jackson State opts to transcribe your interview, you will have the option of reviewing that transcription. Do you want this option? —.

The final retyped and edited transcript, together with the tape of the interview will be placed in the Oral History Collection at Jackson State University and the city of Jackson.

I, Robert H. Clark, have read the above, and in view of the historical and scholarly value of this information, in return for a final typed copy of the transcript, I knowingly and voluntarily permit Jackson State University and the city of Jackson, Mississippi, the full use of this information. I hereby grant and assign all of 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 and the city of Jackson, Mississippi.

Robert H. Clark
Interviewee's Signature

DeFord Terry Harrison
Interviewer's Signature

Date Agreement signed

11/15/04

Oral History number assigned

83.02 (1-13-83); 83.03 (1-24-83);

83.04 (4-26-83); 83.05 (4-29-83);

83.06 (5-16-83); 83.07 (5-17-83);

83.08 (5-20-83); 83.09 (5-23-83)

INTERVIEWEE: Robert Clark
INTERVIEWER: Alferdteen Harrison
DATE OF INTERVIEW: January 13, 1983
O.H. 83.02

Harrison: Today is January 13, 1983 and I am in the office of Representative Robert G. Clark. We are going to start by asking you to give a personal assessments of yourself and then I will go into some greater details in terms of my questions.

So, Representative Clark, who are you?

Clark: I am Robert G. Clark, II. The G stands for George. I am from Holmes County. That is where I was born. My early years were in the Ebenezer Community. My first high school year was at Lexington, that was the Ambrose High School. The second semester was at Mount Olive and the last three years of high school were at Durant, Mississippi at the Holmes County Training School. After that I entered Jackson State in 1948. I attended school for three years. I was out and did substitute work for two quarters. I came back and started teaching school in 1952 and I graduated in 1953.

When I was growing up, I was born and reared on my family's farm in Ebenezer. There were three of us in our immediate family. My mother deceased when I was in high school my sophomore year. My father was a school teacher, teaching at home, we were a very religious family. My father was active in the church. He was as active in politics as he could be at that time. He was one of the few black persons that was voting in Holmes County. Eventually, that is when he lost his job. Not because they wanted him to take his name off the role, but they wanted to tell him who to vote for. When he told them that they couldn't tell him who to vote for, they became disenchanted with that. Also he was holding voter registration classes in the Goodman Community and the white folks didn't want that.

During the time when I grew up in Holmes County when we were going to elementary school, I had to walk three or four miles to school. Sometimes the length of the school term was three or four months, but I attended everyday. I had to attend high school in those places because Blacks at that time, had to go away from home to board in order to get a high school education.

As I said my father was active in politics and very active in the church. Prior to that, my grandfather, who was a slave, was the chairman of the ~~first~~ Republican Party in the state of Mississippi which was in Hinds County. He was

Clark: chariman of the party at the time when Sheriff Caldwell was killed and they had the Clinton Massacre. He was suppose to have been killed because he refused to leave. He had good white friends that took him out of Edwards, supposedly, and told him, "William, I am going to kill you tonight. We have asked you to leave and this is your last chance. I told them to let me kill you. I will shoot over your head and you fall down. If you don't I'm going to have to blow your brains out." He consented to do that and went on to Vicksburg and left there and went to Greenville. The Yellow Fever broke out and he came out to Holmes County.

When everybody else would walk to church and I was the smallest one in the family. I was a very weasely little fellow. I couldn't walk the long distance to church, five or six miles. They would leave ~~at home with him~~ ^{with him} and I would sit in his lap and would smoke his pipe and would often tell me about the things that had happened to him. I saw the difficulties that my father had just trying to be a citizen. It was in me to someday try to better the conditions of the people.

*Line
Mississippi*

I felt that all people should have an equal right and an equal opportunity. I thought I could do that by becoming a lawyer. In a Black school, we didn't have counselors at that time. I had some problems with my eyes. I practically lost my eyesight a couple of times. I got behind in my schooling, but luckily we had some good people in Durant that let me do homework across the summer and make up the work. I kept up with my class. I never thought about dropping out of school, although I couldn't study for one year. I had to take tests orally my tenth grade year and audit the classes. If I had had to lay out that year, I would have dropped out of high school and gone to Chicago. My people didn't know that. My father didn't and my mother was deceased. That is what I would have done if I had gotten behind in my class.

After I got to Jackson State I really wanted to become a lawyer. My whole reason for wanting to become a lawyer was because I thought I had to be a lawyer to participate in politics. I really didn't know. The head of student services called me into her office. She asked me, "Are you Robert G. Clark from Picken, Mississippi, Route 1, Box 185?" I said, "Yes mam, I am." She pulled off her glasses and she put her finger right up in my nose. She said, "I see that you want to be a lawyer. Let me tell you one thing, Jackson College is strictly for the education of rural Negro Teachers and we are not going to allow you to use the teaching profession as a stepping stone to another profession. Do you still want to be a lawyer?" I said, "Yes mam, I do. Then she said, "I

Clark: am going to give you until Monday morning, that was a Saturday morning, to decide if you want to be a lawyer or not. If you still want to be a lawyer, I am going to have you pack your duds and get away from here." I went back to the dorm and packed my duds - my clothes - that is what she was talking about. I was prepared to go back to her office that Monday morning and leave Jackson. Luckily she never called in and I was certainly glad of that. I got a chance to stay there. After I got out of school, I didn't know at that time, I could have gone into law school without majoring in Pre-Law. I really didn't know that. It is for that reason I never entered law school. That basically tells you something about myself and who I am.

Harrison: Do you consider your work as a legislator taking place of what you could have done as a lawyer?

Clark: I am pretty sure it would have. I am pretty sure that whatever I would have gone into, finance or just a farmer, law or medicine, I would have found myself doing the same thing that I am doing now. I am not going to say that I would have run in 1967 when I did, but eventually I would have. It is interesting how I got into politics. In 1967 in Holmes County, when a series of blacks were attempting to run, I thought I would run for Sheriff. Not that I wanted to be Sheriff, but that was the way to get in because we had a very mean Sheriff. He was very cruel. He had beaten up a lot of black folks. He had struck me once.

Harrison: What was his name?

Clark: Andrew Smith. I was going to run against him. There were some blacks that thought I was not militant enough. When I was away from home on that weekend, they put another guy in the race to run for Sheriff. Then I declared my candidacy for Superintendent of Education, because at that time we were just having Adult Education for the first time. Being a coach and a school administrator, I had gone into homes and it was fruitless for us to take the children during the day and try to uplift them and motivate them and then send them right back to the same house. I wanted to have an Adult Education Program, but the Superintendent of Education said point blank, no, we will not have an Adult Education Program. It was at that time that I announced my candidacy against him. I told him that next year we will have one because I will be the superintendent. After I told him that, I was released from my job. The Legislature was meeting at that time. They got some special legislation passed where as the superintendent would be appointed, so I couldn't run against the superintendent. While we were fighting that in court, I decided I

Clark: would run against those who had introduced the Bill that would not allow me to run. That is how I got to the Legislator and I have been here every since.

Harrison: Who was your lawyer at the time, when you were fighting the suit in court?

Clark: I don't recall who the lawyer was. It was the Lawyer's Committee for the Civil Rights Under The Law, LCDC. Their headquarters was down on Farish Street. That has been a long time ago and I can't recall. I can think of it sometimes later and tell you who the lawyers were at that time.

After I graduated from Jackson College I taught for seven years at Louise, Mississippi, that is in Humphreys County. I started out as classroom teacher and coach. My last few years I was coach, principal of high school, and classroom teacher.

Harrison: What did you teach?

Clark: I taught health and physical education and junior high school math, science and social studies. I was released from that job. I told you I was fired in Holmes County. I was released from that job in 1959. That is the year I completed my Master's Degree from Michigan State. I had started teaching in 1952. This was during the time they were talking about integration. They would ask me what my philosophy on integration, I would simply say that integration was alright. The children can get along, but it is going to have to be the elderly that will have to tell the children what to do and they will get along.

During my first week I observed that we had lots of library books for the first time in the high school in Louise and the high school in Belzonia. My superior, the building superintendent, called me in one day and told me that S. M. Brown, the white superintendent, had told him that in the library at Louise and McNair at Belzonia was a book with a white rabbit and a black rabbit on the back. He had that book pulled at McNair and he wanted the book pulled at Louise for the reason that if black children see a black rabbit and a white rabbit together they will think they they are beupse to be together. I told my superintendent that under no terms would I do that. If he wanted that so and so book pulled in the library, he would have to do that himself. I was not going to pull it. There were a series of events like that. After

Clark: school was out, I was informed that I would not have a job. That is how I got away from Louise.

After having worked there for seven years, I went to Leake County for two years. I had a very beautiful relationship with the people in the community of Louise. When I went back to run in 1971, that is one of the reasons that I won. I wasn't suppose to win, not as a black at that time. Many of the students that I had taught were mothers and fathers, leaders of churches and holding responsible positions in the community. Many of the parents were there. They trusted me and they went for me.

So, I went into Leake County and taught two years there. I left there after two years to be near my father and my two elderly aunts. My father passed the next year after I got back home in 1962 and one of my elderly aunts passed a couple of years later. That is how I got back to Holmes County. I stayed there for five years and moved out again.

After that I said, the hell with that, I was going home to my farm and I was going to get into public life and I was not going to ask another sucker for a job, because if you couldn't do it, you would get fired. An example of that is when I was at Lexington Attendance Center when James Meredith entered Ole Mississippi, the white community was very upset. I was practicing football at Lexington and one of my players went uptown. He was about sundown getting back. He had to wait while we were delivering other players home. A white fellow got after him in a car and made him jump off into a ten-foot ditch because they asked him what did he think about that Nigger going to school at Ole Mississippi? He told them that you ought to go anywhere you want to go. I went to the superintendent and the Board of Education and asked if they could give us some kind of protection. He told me that the only kind of protection he could give us was for us not to practice football after school, just go home and stay out of the way. I said that we were going to practice football, and protect ourselves. They didn't like that.

Harrison: What happened after this in Lexington? This is a private school, right?

Clark: No, Lexington Attendance Center is a public school. During the spring of 1966 I had started working as a coordinator. I would go there in the evening from 4:00 until 8:00 or from 6:00. That is Saints Junior College, a private school. After I was fired in 1966, I went to the private school. A few months later I was the Director of an Adult Education Program where approximately four or five hundred adults came through, getting a second start.

Clark: I was getting a chance to do at the private school what I had wanted the county to do, give those black parents a second chance, an opportunity for an education to learn how to read and write, learn how to take care of themselves, learn how to dress, learn how to put screens on the doors. I worked there until 1967 when I had to resign after I declared my candidacy. That was a federal program and I had to resign from the federal position to run. I was working part-time with that institution and I still work part-time for them now.

Harrison: It seems like you were fired a number of times, how many?

Clark: I was fired twice. I was fired at Louise in 1959. They didn't give me a reason, but it was because of the position, I took on the up coming integration. This was long before the hot 1960s, as they called it, because I felt that there would be nothing wrong with it.

Harrison: You spoke out?

Clark: I spoke out at that time in 1959. Then again in 1965.

Harrison: Now, when you were teaching at Louise and you spoke out, on what occasion would this have been?

Clark: On the occasion when I refused to pull the book out of the library. On other occasions it got around after some white folks, would ask black folks at the time what did they think about various things. If you served in a leadership position they would want to try to think for you or try to influence your thinking. Some black folks say it was detrimental. It just can't be done because those folks are crazy. When they ask me, I would say that it could be done and there isn't anything wrong with it. It isn't anything wrong with blacks and whites going to school. No, it isn't anything wrong with it. Color is only skin deep. Then that word began to get around and others began to ask me.

Harrison: When you took those positions at that period of time, was there other blacks that had similar views who also spoke out?

Clark: At the time I was in Louise, seventeen miles south of Belzonia. In Belzonia, this was the time that Rev. G. W. Lee was killed. I was in Belzonia the night he was killed. This is the time that Gus Coats was shot and had to leave Belzonia. This is the time that Mr. Johnson, and I can't think of his first name, but he was the owner of a funeral home, was carried out into the country and supposedly beaten. They kill him because he was a mulatto. Rev. Joiner was up at Isola. There was an active move going on in Belzonia at the time. That

Clark: was one of the hottest places for Civil Rights in Mississippi at the time. There was no other person in Louise.

Harrison: No one else in Louise?

Clark: No one else in Louise was taking the position that I was taking at that time. The same thing can very well happen to me. I understood that when I started out in the 1960s, things were a lot different than it is now. That is why some young individuals don't understand the position that I take now. The position that I took is that if someone wants to work with you, they should be fair and honest without the regard to race, creed, or color. We should work for the cause of humanity. During the time when I started out, there were many times that I left homes and left hand written notes. I wasn't married and didn't have children. I didn't have anyone but my father and my aunts. I would leave home not knowing if I was going to return or not.

Harrison: What did you mean about hand written notes?

Clark: I would leave notes for them, so if I didn't return . . .

Harrison: Where were you going?

Clark: I guess I wrote about where I was going and only God knows how many small wills, saying what to do if I didn't return. It was like that and you had to have that kind of courage to get out there. I knew even when I was in Humphreys County that it could happen to me. Then, in the early 1960s it was not safe. You would get calls saying what they were going to do to you. I found out the best way to do it, was not to ignore them. If you ignored them, they would continue after you. The best thing to do was to just say, "Well, don't worry if you get me, we are going to get some of you too. It isn't going to be any red necks. It is going to be some big white folks to go too." When I started to respond like that, those things started to baiting down.

Harrison: Were you just bluffing when you said that?

Clark: I wasn't going to do any violence, but you got to fight fire with fire. We weren't going out to do anybody or take anybody in, but in the mean time, we were not going to bow on our knees.

Harrison: Were you working with someone else? Did you have supporters at this time, you said, "we."

Clark: In Holmes County there were supporters but in Louise when I was in Humphreys County there were no supporters. I wasn't part of the elderly group up in Belzonia.

Harrison: What kind of ordinance . . . ?

Clark: In Holmes County we had the Freedom Democratic Party. As you know the Freedom Democratic Party is a coalition that was born out of SNCC. Then a split developed in the the SNCC in the 1960s. They came together and formed the Freedom Democratic Party. The Freedom Democratic Party in Holmes County was very strong. It is the strongest organization in the county. The organization has mellowed quite a bit. At one time the organization was looked upon as being a radical organization. Now the organization would be just as radical now as it was then, if there was a need. At that time the only thing it was concerned about was justice. Whatever it took to do that, they were willing to do it. They were not out looking for violence, but in the mean time they were not going to be taken on their knees.

Harrison: When you decided to run for the Legislature, what kind of support did you have at that time?

Clark: The support I had at that time was the support of the Freedom Democratic Party. I had the support of a small group of white people in Lexington and a few in Tchula. A few white people in Tchula who supported me had been so called liberal people who had made a killing off of black folks through night spots in Jackson. The few white people in Lexington that were supporting me, realized that Holmes County was a predominately black county and they could not continue to go on as they were going. They realized that it was time for change. Rather than having a bloody change, they were willing to get in there and try to work to have a coalition leadership in the county rather than having a bloody take-over. I have to recognize that I did get some white support in 1967. It took some strong people to do that, but my base was the Freedom Democratic Party. That was predominately Black with a few Whites from out of the state.

Harrison; Can you give any names of these white liberals who supported you?

Clark: I will give the names of some, but some I will not give out the names at this time. An example is Buford Taylor, Supervisor of Beat 5; D. C. Conn from Thornton; Calvin Moore who was running for Sheriff at the time; William Moses who was the Mayor of Lexington and the Chairman of the Election Commission at the time. There are some other names that I could call, but I won't do it.

CLARK, Robert

9

Harrison: I would like to thank you for these few minutes today.
We will pick up from here the next time.

Clark: This is very interesting. Just ask the question and if I
start rambling, you just break in.