

JACKSON STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

THE FARISH STREET HISTORIC DISTRICT PROJECT

ATTORNEY IN THE HISTORIC DISTRICT

O. H. 78.18

R. Jess Brown

Interviewed
by

CATHERINE McMICHAEL

on

June 23, 1978

JACKSON STATE COLLEGE
Jackson, Mississippi

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

INTERVIEWER AGREEMENT

I, Catherine McMichael, in view of the
(Interviewer, please print)

historical and scholarly value of the information contained in the
interview with R. JESS BROWN, 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.

Catherine McMichael
Interviewer (signature)

TEL 969-1320
Interview Number

June 23, 1978
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.

Catherine McMichael

I, *R. J. Brown* 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, 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.

R. J. Brown
Interviewee (Signature)
June 23, 1978
Date

INTRODUCTION

Attorney R. Jess Brown, was born in Coffeerville, Kansas, in 1912. He came to Mississippi around 1946.

In this interview Attorney Brown reveals his personal educational development and his exciting legal studies and career. He was a teacher at Louisville, Kentucky, Prairie View College, Alcorn College, Lanier High School and Campbell College.

He gives some of his recollections of black businesses on Farish Street when he first arrived in Jackson, Mississippi in 1948. He states that intergration brought about the change.

Attorney Brown's discussion of the following cases are particularly significant: James Meredith entering the University of Mississippi; State of Mississippi VS Charles Parker; his perceptions of the Civil Rights Movement and the NAACP's involvement are enlightening.

INTERVIEWEE: R. Jess Brown
INTERVIEWER: Catherine McMichael
DATE OF INTERVIEW: June 23, 1978
TRANSCRIBER: Terry McDonald
FINAL TYPIST: Herd E. Graves
O. H.: 78.18

Brown: I came to the state of Mississippi somewhere around, I believe, it was 1946 to be exact. I came here to teach at Alcorn College. I came here from Louisville, Kentucky, at that time I previously had taught at Prairie View College. I taught at Alcorn College from 1946 or 1948. I came to Jackson, Mississippi sometime in the fall of 1948 to teach at Lanier High School. I later taught at Campbell College. I came back here about 1953 and started practicing law in Vicksburg, Mississippi. I practiced law in Vicksburg from 1953 up until 1962 or 1963. Then I opened a full-time office in Jackson to practice law, where I've been practicing law every since.

McMichael: Okay. I'm sure you attended church, what religion are you?

Brown: Religion is under . . .

McMichael: Baptist?

Brown: Christian religion, you want to know what denomination I am?

McMichael: Yes sir.

Brown: My denomination is Methodist.

McMichael: Okay. While growing up, was your neighborhood predominately black or is it still?

Brown: Well, in my hometown the neighborhood wasn't predominately black, it was black. I don't recall any whites living in my immediate neighborhood.

McMichael: Okay, can you remember your first job, that you had?

Brown: The first job after I came out of college or all types of jobs I had throughout?

McMichael: Well, after college.

Brown: After I received my Bachelor's Degree at Illinois State College, I came back to my home town, Scoba, Oklahoma, and taught there in the Manual Training High School, in Scoba, Oklahoma. That was my first job.

McMichael: Okay. Would you like to describe your relationship with your family while growing up? Were they strict parents or just what?

Brown: Now, my parents weren't too easy. I think, they were sort of, I guess the word I would use would be sort of, just in between, you know.

McMichael: Okay. What's some of the holidays that you celebrated most?

Brown: What holidays?

McMichael: Yes.

Brown: I don't know if I celebrate any too much now. I would assume that Christmas would be the one that would be celebrated the most.

McMichael: Okay. How have the businesses in the community here changed since you first came to work in Jackson?

Brown: Well, you mean when I came to the state or the city of Jackson?

McMichael: The City of Jackson.

Brown: When I came to Jackson about 1970 . . . I came to Jackson about 1948 things were quite, quite different than they are now. Matter of fact, it was a strict segregation of the races. There were very few people voting. Rather there were very few Blacks registered to vote in the State of Mississippi, also very few in Jackson. I would assume that in Hinds County, including Jackson, at that time, there were more Blacks registered here than in any other county in the State of Mississippi, to my knowledge. As to other things, of course, all of the restaurants were segregated, cafes, theatres. Practically all phases of life were segregated here.

McMichael: Okay. Then how would you say the black business of today differs from what it has been called in the past? There have been a lot of changes.

Brown: Well, let's see black businesses. I would say that there were more black businesses when I came in than there are now. That was because of strict segregation--restaurants, places of entertainment like ballrooms, clubs, barber shops and stores I would say there were, at that time, more black businesses owned and operated by Blacks also patronized by blacks than they probably have now. I think, that's due to the fact of integration.

McMichael: Alright.

- Brown: In other words, blacks were forced to eat in black restaurants, forced to go to black theatres, forced to patronize black businesses because they were either segregated when they went to these white places or they were not allowed to go at all. They went to some places for instance, like in Vicksburg, and some other places. I think, in Jackson there was one deal that if blacks went to a white theatre they sat up in the balcony. They had to go around to the side and sit in the balcony. It was on the third floor.
- McMichael: Okay. Back to you, just what did you do for recreation in the "Good Old Days" in the past?
- Brown: In the "Good Old Days?"
- McMichael: In the "Good Old Days," in the the younger days?
- Brown: Well, I don't know what you consider, "Good Old Days." I don't know if there were any all that good. They probably were not as good as they are now, so far as I am concerned, but you want to know what did I do?
- McMichael: If you don't mind.
- Brown: Are you talking about other than my work in my profession?
- McMichael: Right, recreational wise.
- Brown: Well, most of my recreation was probably traveling and I attended theatres, those that were open to me. There was not as many forms of entertainment available for blacks as there are now.
- McMichael: Okay.
- Brown: I think, when I first came there were no swimming pools, later they did open up at least one black swimming pool. An old black swimming pool was out in the College Park area. There weren't places where you could go bowling. Because you were black, you were excluded from using golf courses and that sort of thing. For instance, now blacks are playing golf on golf courses. They are swimming in various swimming pools and palces, at that time they were barred from using.
- McMichael: Alright. Do you or can you recall any events which had some great impact on your life?
- Brown: Well, it's hard to say what particular event that had a great impact on my life. I've had so many events that I, you know, that there were so many that I have experienced.
- McMichael: Yes.

Brown: I guess one of the things would be that after I had returned from law school and passed the bar examination and went into practicing, probably about a year or two, I became engaged in Civil Rights Law. I was obtained by the NAACP newscast to represent the NAACP Legal Defense in Mississippi, seeking relief for oppressed Blacks in the civil rights area. I filed the first voting rights suit to my knowledge, in Mississippi; the case of DARWIN vs. DANIEL. I filed that case in behalf of the NAACP Legal Force, representing particularly, Reverend Darwin. I don't remember his first name. That suit was filed in Jefferson Davis County, giving the right to vote.

McMichael: Okay. When did

Brown: I filed that suit before the Federal Government even had the right to file such lawsuits in behalf of blacks as to their right to vote.

McMichael: So, you were associated with the Civil Rights. What year was this?

Brown: I can't recall, in the early 1950's. I guess, maybe, the greatest impact was one, I would say would be the suit that I was involved in along with other NAACP Defense Attorneys.

There was a suit that I filed with James Meredith, against the University of Mississippi. I do recall that I filed . . . that suit in Meridian, Mississippi. Matter of fact. I drove around the courthouse three or four times trying to get up nerve enough to go in the Clerk's Office and file the lawsuit. After I filed the lawsuit, I got in my car to return to Jackson. Before I got out of the city limits of Meridian

Of course, many people all over the nation pretty well knew about that suit of James Meredith against the University of Mississippi. Now after the court had ordered James Meredith to be admitted to the University of Mississippi, things happened. Delays, rather Ross Barnett and the Lieutenant Governor, standing in the door to prevent Meredith from actually enrolling and becoming a student at the University of Mississippi, notwithstanding the Court Order; also the riot that occurred on the University of Mississippi's campus. That occurred the first night after Meredith had arrived on the campus. That was one that had great impact.

Another was the lawsuit involving the STATE of MISSISSIPPI vs. CHARLES PARKER. That was around the latter part of the 1950's, I believe. Parker was charged with the rape of a white woman. I appeared there along with Jack H. Young, Sr., who is now deceased. We filed motion for an indictment on grounds of a systematic exclusion of Blacks and Jurists, the exclusion of

- Brown: Blacks and Jurists, the exclusion of the motion hearing. The trial judge, who was Judge Ceily Davis, presided at the time, at Pearl River County, Circuit Court. Pearl River County had set the case down for trial, I think, the following week. Subsequent to the conclusion of the hearing, and prior to the date set for the trial that night, Charles Parker was taken out of jail. Later his body was found in the Pearl River. I think that was a case that had a tremendous impact upon me.
- McMichael: Okay.
- Brown: There were many more occasions that I could refer to that did have considerable impact on me.
- McMichael: Okay. What would be some of the disadvantages of the Civil Rights Organizations or disadvantages?
- Brown: Disadvantages of the Civil Rights?
- McMichael: Or were there any disadvantages?
- Brown: Well, the Civil Rights, there weren't any disadvantages of Civil Rights Organizations, so far as I could see. However, Civil Rights Organizations suffered disadvantages to great extent by the mere fact that they were seeking to be equally represented in the courts. Also putting forth every effort they could to obtain equal justice under a law, as they were supposedly entitled to under the law. They were also attempting to break down all forms of discrimination on buses, trains, airlines, and all other sorts. All this was done prior to the Freedom Riders coming in. Of course, there were a lot of disadvantages suffered by the Freedom Riders. Now a lot of organizations that came into Mississippi about that time, like, I think, the organization was called . . . I can't, it doesn't come to my mind right now.
- McMichael: Okay. Did the local population support the people of areas out of town during this time?
- Brown: Yes. I think, they did to a great extent. Mostly students who came here from various sections of the country to participate in the Movement of Civil Rights were certainly given every opportunity by many of the blacks. They stayed in their homes, they contributed money for bonds and that sort of thing when they were arrested. So they got a lot of support from blacks in Mississippi and Jackson. As a matter fact, the students in Jackson's High Schools marched. Of course, the NAACP had its office here, in which Medgar Evers was the Field Secretary at that time and that did much to getting the people to support those who advocated Civil Rights for Blacks.
- McMichael: Okay. During this time of the Civil Rights Movement, is there anything that you would do differently if you had to

McMichael: do it again?

Brown: Well, I don't know. I've thought a lot about some of the things that I find. I don't know, if I would do it any differently. I'd probably do it the same way. But sometimes people soon forget. It doesn't take them long to forget what has happened. People right now hardly know what happened ten years ago. It appears to me that there is not enough being done to keep the young people alerted as to what did happen. They soon forget. Everything looks easy now.

McMichael: Right, right.

Brown: But this, we're talking about something that didn't happen a thousand years ago. We've only had about ten years of anything that looks like relief preceeding 1978.

McMichael: Okay. Do you thing the black people are taking advantage of the opportunities that improved this movement?

Brown: Yes. I think, many of them are. No question about it. For instance, when I came to Mississippi, there were very few black lawyers in Mississippi. I do recall we had Attorney Burns. I think, it was James Burns, a lawyer in Meridian, Mississippi. He must have been about . . . far up in his seventies or close to eighty years of age.

They had another lawyer named Perkins. I don't recall his first name. Attorney Perkins was from Meridian, not Meridian but Natchez, Mississippi. Burns, I mentioned Burns. They also had a lawyer in Mound Bayou, who was a mayor over there at that time. Ben Green was his name. I started to practice in Vicksburg in 1953. I was the only black lawyer in Vicksburg. In Jackson, you had Jack Young, Senior, Carsie A. Hall, Sidney Tharpe and then when I came to Jackson, I joined the ranks. So, we had four here in Jackson. So, there was not more than a half dozen or more blacks lawyers over the whole state. Now we have possibly far over one hundred black lawyers.

McMichael: Right.

Brown: Also, it was once considered that this would never have happened for many blacks in Mississippi. I didn't think I would ever see any black judges in Jackson. Of course, we do have two black judges. One is Jack Young, Jr., who is a presiding municipal judge in Jackson and Ruben Lee Anderson is serving as a county judge and also Lee Dio has served as acting Circuit Judge.

That's in that area. Now, of course, we have a number elected officials. I haven't researched this but I am told that we

Brown: have more black elected officials than any other state at this time. So, I could go on and on talking about the advantages.

McMichael: Okay, well.

Brown: The advantages.

McMichael: Okay. During the time, did you ever try any whites . . . the white person?

Brown: Did I ever do any what now?

McMichael: Try any, did you ever . . .

Brown: Represent any whites?

McMichael: Right, yes.

Brown: Well, during that time of the Civil Rights struggle, the only whites that I represneted, I think, I'm safe in saying that maybe some exception, that the only whites that other black lawyers represented were those who participated in the Civil Rights cases; represneting clients engaging in Civil Rights. Of course, there were quite a few whites who came in here, you understand, to help out with the cause, who were arrested because of the fact they were trying to get blacks registered to vote. For instance, like trumped-up charges that were filed against them. We did represent quite a few whites, so far, as that is concerned. Presently, I, we do, our firm does.

McMichael: No, I was only speaking of during the time of Civil Rights.

Brown: During Civil Rights, yes?

McMichael: Okay. Would the Civil Rights Movement had gotten going, do you think, in Jackson, without the Freedom Riders?

Brown: Oh yes. I think, it would have. I think, it was probably started. Well, we had started before the Freedom Riders came in. We had started. We had already filed a suit . . . for the right to vote, for Blacks to vote in Jefferson Davis County. What else had happened? The Meredith lawsuit had already been filed before the freedom riders got here. We didn't file a suit to desegregate airlines, buses, terminals, and other means of transportation until after the freedom riders came in. Of course, that was at the time when, I think,--the time the freedom riders came in, that motivated us into bringing or taking offensive action action, particularly for the right to sit anywhere you wanted. You know, in your terminals you were otherwise afraid of being in the wrong.

Brown: It was supposed to be segregation and so forth.

McMichael: Okay. Would you say that this was started with the middle class or it took part in all classes?

Brown: It all started with mostly, not the middle classes, no, no. It didn't start with the middle class. The middle class was doing fairly well, you know, . . . middle class black, they were doing fairly well. They had, if not a two car garage, they had a one car garage. They were doing pretty good. As a matter of fact, they were as scared as hell. The middle calss, they were afraid, you understand . . . they wouldn't do a damn thing. Actually, what we call the common calss of Blacks, and including the students and the youth, are the ones who got out there and laid in the street and sat in the restaurants, you understand, in "Sit-In Demonstrations," in order to help the situation. There were young people at that time and some older people who were instrumental in helping out in the situation by providing money, bonds, and that sort of thing. I do recall that Reverend Smith, who operates the Smith's Grocery, Smith Supermarket here. One instance, they use to go there practically everyday and pick up (for a long time) at least \$500.00, to make bonds with and all that sort of thing. Largely, teachers, they didn't do a damn thing. They were scared they would get fired, you understand. Alright, people who had certain jobs, they were scared they would lose their job. What happened is that there were a lot of people laid back and didn't do a damn thing but watch some of us get out here and do it, including those lawyers and others who had the guts enough to get out there and do it. After the thing got where it was easy, well here they come. And, so today, I know a lot of them now who are great in politics, taking outstanding roles now in 1978, who you couldn't hear a damn thing from in 1958.

McMichael: Okay.

Brown: Now write that in your history book.

McMichael: Okay. Well thank you, Mr. Brown, I really appreciate you taking out the time to talk with me. Do I have your permission to use this material?

Brown: Yes, you may use everything I said.

McMichael: At Jackson State University?

Brown: Yes.

McMichael: Do I have your permission to use this interview?

Brown: Yes, you may use it because it's just what I'm saying, just what I got to say.

McMichael: Okay, well thank you.

-End of Interview-

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