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## 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

Alfred Harrison  
Interviewer's Signature

Date Agreement signed

11/15/04

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INTERVIEWEE: Robert Clark  
INTERVIEWER: Alferdteen Harrison  
DATE OF INTERVIEW: April 26, 1983  
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Harrison: This is the third interview in a series of interviews with Robert Clark.

Clark: Today we are going to start with you having graduated from grade school, eight grade graduation. I guess they called it a school closing, did they?

Clark: School closing and eight grade graduation. One of the things that I remember most is that we would go into the forest and get bushes that would be blooming. We would have the stage decorated. That was the only decoration we had. It is not the kind of decoration that people know today, but it was the beauty of nature directly from the forest. That's when we would have the play and then we would have graduation. At this time we would have a speaker, the valedictorian and salutatorian of the class.

Clark: After graduating from the eight grade, there was no buses running in the rural area to take you to a high school. You either had to go away and board to go to highschool or you would have to ride a mule or something. There wasn't enough students out there to take a family care and go to high school. I started at Ambrose High School in Lexington that fall. I went there for six weeks. I was rooming with an elderly lady. She was very nice, but I can't recall her name. I loved her very much and she loved me. I couldn't eat her cooking because her biscuits never got done.

Harrison: What do you mean, they never got done?

Clark: They just didn't get done. You know, how they take their hands and mix the flour, milk, and the doe up? Well, when she put them in the wood stove they just didn't get done. They would still be raw in the inside. That is the way she liked her biscuits.

Harrison: Did you help her with any chores?

Clark: I didn't help her with any chores. She didn't really have any chores because she was an elderly lade. I would bring in the wood or coal. She would burn the wood for the stove and coal for the fireplace.

Clark: After six weeks I left and went to the Mount Olive Vocational High School. It was seventeen miles north of Lexington. My uncle had recently gone there to be principal and a vocational education teacher. I stayed there for one year and completed the ninth grade there.

Harrison: What was the difference between the curriculum at the Ambrose High School and the Mount Olive High School?

Clark: At Mount Olive School the vocation we took was agriculture. That was learning to make single trees, learning to shop and plow punch, learning to make hammer handles and just learning things that you need on the farm.

Harrison: What is a single tree?

Clark: A single tree is the thing that you would hook to the plow then hook the mules' harness into the same tree. That was the connection between the mule and the plow. We would use it to pull the plow.

The rest of the curriculum was the same except at Ambrose we had building trades rather than teaching you to make things that you would need on a farm. They taught you how to prune trees, how to castrate and vaccinate cows, hogs, and etc. That was the vocation agriculture curriculum.

Harrison: Did you all have anything in English?

Clark: Yes, we had the basic at both schools. We had five subjects, English, mathematics, social studies, science, and vocational education. We had the same basic courses at Ambrose except the vocational courses at Ambrose were in carpentry and brick masonry.

Harrison: I'm from Piney Woods and I was trying to compare what the curriculum would be like at other vocational schools. Was there any attempt to apply things in English or talk farm practices in English or in any of your other courses?

Clark: O, there was no attempt. At both schools the girls took home economics. Only the boys had the vocational courses. Continue your question, maybe I don't understand it enough to answer it.

Harrison: One of the things that Dr. Jones use to say a lot is that one should apply the basic principles learned in science and math to vocational education. I was wondering if there was any attempt . . .

Clark: There was no attempt to correlate them. Any correlation was was incidental.

Harrison: So it was all separate?

Clark: Yes, I am very much aware of what you are talking about, but there was no attempt. You just learned those things for the sake of learning. If you had to learn algebra you learned it, or whatever just for the sake of learning.

Harrison: Was there any different kind of support for the vocational school than for the other regular high schools, such as Ambrose?

Clark: Yes, they all were supported through the county and the state except the vocational agriculture department was supported by certain amounts of federal money granted by the Morrill Act. The same Act that formed such schools as Michigan State, which is the oldest land grant college and Alcorn is the oldest land grant black college. There is a certain amount of federal monies to fund the vocational part of that program. The vocational education teacher was the principal in most of those schools at that time and the home economics teachers, of course, salaries were paid with federal monies from the Morrill Act. Other than that, they were funded the same way.

Harrison: You couldn't tell very much differences, in term of your experiences, except for the vocational part?

Clark: Except for the vocational part of it, it was was all the same.

Harrison: Was there any attempt to make the implements that you were making like the single tree and those things useful in the community or were you just taught to do them without any application?

Clark: You were taught to do that because you could go back home and use it on the farm or you could teach other people in your community to make it. There were a lot of shops around in the community at that time, but if you learned how to do these things at school you could definitely make use of that on the farm and in the community.

Harrison: Would there be any job opportunities available for young men who had gone through this program that probably that wouldn't be available otherwise? I am talking about other than your farm.

Clark: If he wanted to become a blacksmith he could learn to do that. Two things if he wanted to really intensify himself, he could learn enough to grow into the community and become a blacksmith. A blacksmith can make pretty good money doing the things that I have talked about sharpening plow pieces, fixing wagon wheels and what have you. You could use this on your own farm. It also had a carry over value for going to college. NORMally if you were real good in vocational agriculture, you could get a recommendation by your vo-ag teacher and Alcorn would give you a scholarship. You could go to college and learn it then teach it to others.

Harrison: Beyond the classroom were there community organizations where this kind of thing was encouraged?

Clark: No, there were not many community organizations at that time. The structure of society didn't allow it. Not only was the society segregated, but they were very careful about the kind of meetings black folks could hold. Black people have been basically taught that you should leave everything up to the Lord. The only thing you had outside school was your church activities. YOU went to Sunday school, regular services, and BYPU. Other than that, you went to weddings and funerals and that was it. Anything beyond that some years later, it wasn't until I was grown that black people began to break that barrier.

My senior year in high school, my father was principal of Goodman Elementary School. They increased that up to a high school. My father was teaching those people to vote and to be first class citizens. They were very good to him. They fired him rather thn beat him up or kill him because he was having meetings other than coming to the school. You just simply didn't do that.

Harrison: What kind of meetings were they?

Clark: They were citizenship meetings. At that time my father was a teacher at a school in the Delta on a plantation on the other side of Tchula. He had been teaching there for two or three years. He came to Goodman as principal the same year I graduated from the eighth grade. He was there for four years.

Harrison: Back to vocational education, the persons who were associated with this was paid by the Agriculture Department?

Clark: A portion of their salary just like the vocational education teachers today, is federal monies and part of it is state monies

Harrison: Were there County Farm Agents at that time?

Clark: Yes.

Harrison: I am trying to figure out was there a relationship between the Agricultural Vocational School and the County Farm Agent.

Clark: They did virtually the same thing, but it wasn't any relation.

Harrison: I know that at Piney Woods they had a vocational agricultural teacher who organized community fairs, I don't know if he did the 4H Clubs or if that was earlier. I guess what I am fishing for is a similarity in this area, something the vocational teacher would have done with the community and the students or this kind of activity?

Clark: The 4H Club was operated by the county agents. You had the Future Farmers of America, it was the organization of the Agriculture Department. You had the Future Homemakers of America. The Future Farmers of America was very closely related to the 4H Clubs where they could have projects in the summer.

Harrison: Were you involved in any of those projects?

Clark: Yes.

Harrison: With the Future Farmers of America?

Clark: Yes with both, Future Farmers and 4H.

Harrison: Tell me about those?

Clark: I have raised chickens, pigs, but I had already done. It wasn't a new experience for me because I already had pigs, cornpatch, etc. During by ninth grade year they would have a community affair once a year. At the community affair this is the time for students and people in the community to bring things and put on exhibits. Some of those items were large eggs, large watermelons, large potatoes, a jar or preserve, a jar or can peaches, or whatever. It was a big community affair.

Harrison: Who organized this?

Clark: It was organized by the school officials, the principal, his wife and other school officials.

Harrison: The youth would participate in this?

Clark: Yes.

Harrison: What kinds of experience did you have relative to this? I am asking if you put things on exhibits, if you won any ribbons, or those kinds of things.

Clark: Yes. You put things on exhibits and you won ribbons.

Harrison: Did you win any?

Clark: Yes, I did.

Harrison: Those . . . .

Clark: There was still another school I went to. After my ninth grade year I went to Durant Attendance Center and spent my last three years. All of this I am talking about is at Mount Olive Vocational School at \_\_\_\_\_ Mississippi, seventeen miles of north of Lexington. My uncle was the principal, his wife was the English teacher and my aunt was the math teacher. He had about seventeen people on his staff.

Harrison: At the Durant Attendance is where you get involved in with putting things on exhibit?

Clark: No, Mount Olive. Durant didn't have that.

Harrison: Can you think of one particular experience that stands out in your mind as embarrassment or that you took pride in?

Clark: No, not at this time. I played basketball, rather I was just learning to play basketball. We didn't have a basketball team in the country where I came from. When I went to Mount Olive it was a learning experience for me. They had had high school there for quite some time. Naturally the things they were doing the little fellow that attended there knew about those things although they didn't get a chance to participate. Their big brother or big sister had participated and they had seen all these things. It was certainly a learning experience. For me it was kind of a catch up game.

We were taught forestry in the vocational agriculture course. We learned how to run a terrace, how to control erosion, and all of that has helped me tremendously even now. I am a farmer and the same experience I had in controlling erosion and setting out pine trees, etc. has been helpful. I am registered in Mississippi as being a forest farmer and the experience I got I got it when I was in the ninth grade in the vocational agriculture program.

Harrison: You haven't had anything since that?

Clark: I had the experience over at Durant Attendance Center, but it wasn't as broad as the experience I had as a ninth grader. The most experience that I had at Durant was shop. I made a few things, but most of it was theory (reading out of an agriculture book). It wasn't like getting outside and putting theory to practice. After we got the theory, we would put it into practice.

Harrison: Your ninth grade experience was at the vocational school and the other one was not?

Clark: The Holmes County Training School was a vocational school also. It was in the city, but you didn't have an opportunity to take a field trip. At Mount Olive you could take a field trip right there in the community because you were in the country. In Mount Olive you could put all theory to practice. In Durant you couldn't take all of those field trips, you would have to go somewhere in the country to do that.

Harrison: I want you to compare the value of that kind of education you received, the vocational education, at that time to what is taught in today's high schools. I am speaking particularly of the vocational education, the way you acquired it compared to the way the children are receiving it today.

Clark: It is not that I can't speak to it, but I guess I can speak to it and be fair. Vocational education today is in a period of transition. We rewrote the vocational education program several years ago because over a period of years we have had industry to come to Mississippi and look at our system of training people. The past government and the speaker of the house have constantly asked me if there was something we could do about the vocational education so that the people coming through the program can have a saleable skill. They wanted to know if the skills that were good for my day are outdated now. Vocational education has changed somewhat. It is not the fault of the instructor out there, but it is the fault of the State of Mississippi. Our system delivered a group of instructors and they were instructed that this is what they were suppose to go out there and teach. We, the legislature and the general populus of the state of Mississippi, and the government in general didn't have anything to do with it. They let someone decide what should be taught. Vocational education has not kept up the pace with modern times. We are behind. We are going to have to run and run fast if we are going to catch up.



Clark: Two years ago when we rewrote the vocational education program, we were going to let this vocational board -- I hope this lay board of education will follow through on what we had in the law. If they don't follow through on it, I will assure you that I will be the one that comes back and rewrite that section. This Vocational Board of Education, the state wide board, would go into the community and make an assesement of what vocation needs to be taught in that community. They would take in consideration the local communtiy as well as the state wide need and say this what shall be tuaght.

Some vocational teachers say, "Well, I have gone to school and you might put me out of a job." We just might because the school deosen't exist for you, it exists for the students. What we will do is give you up to five years to go back to school and be retrained in your area. We are being gracious because the students are still missing out during those five years. If you still haven't learned what is needed to be taught, then good-bye. So, we are in a period of transition.

During my freshman year in high school, I got struck in the eye playing basketball. My sight began to get dim in my left eye and I completly lost sight in my left eye and a certified cataract came on the left eye. As I entered high school at Holmes County Training School in Durant during my tenth grade year, my sight began to get dim in the right eye. My mother was still living then. That summer my mother sent me to Memphis to one of her sister's home to get my eyes checked. This must have been during the end of my junior year around 1946 or 1947.

My sight had deteriorated in my left eye and it was deteriorating in my right eye. I had an operation on both my eyes. I laid in bed for fourteen days with my eyes covered up. I didn't know if I would ever see again. When they removed the patches from my eyes, I could see some out of my right eye and none out of my left eye. When I came back home and started school, I was advised not to go back to school because I couldn't see well enough.

The principal and his wife, Mr. and Mrs. Sullivan, told my mother to let me come on to school. They would let me audit the classes and take oral examinations. They would give me as little written work as possible. That was perhaps, the turning point in my career. I had always been a mannerable child, but outspoken. I had a mind of my own to do what I wanted to do, but I obeyed people up to a certain point. During that time peer pressure was so strong that you couldn't afford to get nehind your group.

Clark: If I would have had to drop out of school for a year, I had told my peoples that I would have run away from home because I didn't want to get behind my peers.

End Side I Tape I

Clark: . . . . My mother had been sick. She wanted to live long enough to see my brother come out of the Army safe so he could help get the operation on my eyes. Before she passed she did have the satisfaction of knowing that I did have sight in one eye, but how well it would be, she never knew.

Naturally, I got behind the rest of my class. Before my operation, it was an embarrassing situation. It almost wrecked my personality. For example, if I was liking a girl and some of the other boys was liking the same girl, one of their friends would come up to me and put his hand to the left of my face and call me. When he called my name I would turn around and he would stick his finger in my eye. It was a laughing situation.

After I graduated from high school, I entered Jackson State. I was behind the better students in the freshman class. About toward the end of the second quarter, I had caught up because I studied very hard.

Harrison: You never regained sight in your left eye?

Clark: No.

Harrison: You can't see out of it now?

Clark: No.

Harrison: It looks perfectly normal.

Clark: It doesn't always follow where I am looking. Sometimes I be looking over this way and it will be looking over that way.

I had to study real hard when I entered Jackson State. I burned the midnight oil a lot of times. I didn't go to football games, I would stay in my room and study. By the end of the second quarter, I was on par or beyond the average the student in the freshman class.

Harrison: You can do what you want to do, I guess.

Clark: You can back up a little if you want to.

Harrison: During your high school years, did you have any ambitions that were beyond what was being offered to you?

Clark: I had ambitions to become a lawyer. I also had the ambition

Clark: to become a minister. I was a very religious person when I was growing up. I joined the church at a early age.

Terry Howard, Andrew Redmond and all of those guys were from Ebzener. One of them went to Havard or Yale. I heard about people working in a lawyer's office as an intern. You would stay there so long and then you would take the Bar exam.

I got no encouragement in becoming a lawyer. People would say that lawyers are crooked and they lie. I still wanted to become a lawyer.

Harrison: You knew the Redmonds and the Howards when you were growing up?

Clark: Yes.

Harrison: What kind of contact did you have with them?

Clark: I had indirect contact with them through my people. They all went to school in Ebnezer with my grandparents. My father's first cousin, S. W. Miller was a graduate of Alcorn. He was in the Black and Tan Republican Party with Perry Howard.

Harrison: Did they have some impact on your desires to become a lawyer?

Clark: Maybe Perry Howard and my grandfather. I just wanted to do something to make a contribution to society.

Harrison: What did you admire about Perry Howard?

Clark: He was just somebody doing something. He was making a contribution.

Harrison: So, you wanted to grow up to be somebody?

Clark: Yes. I don't know whether I should say this or not. This happen a long time ago and I don't want to embrass anyone. They were mulato and that is all they believed in when it came to marrying. This is the part I didn't like. They said when a dark boy would go to see one of the daughters one of the older men would say, "You damn black bear, get up and leave my house. I don't want you in my family." I didn't like that part, but I didn't hold it against them. They were still from Ebnezer and he was still my idol.

Harrison: Is this the same Redmond that lives here in Jackson?

Clark: Yes, they are his relatives.

Harrison: Relatves to S. D. and Gus Redmond?

Clark: Yes, Sidney Redmond, Gus Redmond. Perry Howard was really a first cousin and a brother.

Harrison: First cousin to you or them?

Clark: No, to them. They were all the same set of people.

Harrison: Did you ever hear anything about their white relatives?

Clark: Yes. I heard about their white relatives, who they were. Their white relatives weren't around there. A lot of white relatives of mulato are still at Ebenezer now, and at Pickens and Lexington. Their white relatives had died out. Most of the Howards and Redmonds left there and came to Jackson. I don't know when any of that group was there. The elite group that were still being talked about by my people. They still had contact and I would see them when I came to Jackson or either they would come back home.

Harrison: When they came back to the community, did they visit the church, or the school, or just the family?

Clark: They would visit the church and visit friends.

Harrison: I am trying to wrap up your high school years. You have already told me about your recreation which was basketball.

Clark: I played basketball at Durant. I didn't play football because of the condition of my eyes. I couldn't stand anything rough after I --before I had the operation I couldn't see well enough then after I regained almost normal eyesight in the right eye, I couldn't stand any rough falls or anything. We didn't have helmets or face guard like we have now. Guys at that time were playing plain outlaw football. The doctors advised me against it because if they tackled you they would stick their finger in your eye.

Harrison: Outlaw football, what does that mean? Without any rules?

Clark: According to the rules of where you were playing. If you went to play a team, then that team got some of their friends to call the game the way they wanted to call it. They would do whatever they had to do to defeat you.

Harrison: So, this was not something that was organized through the school?

Clark: It was organized. It was organized athletics. Athletics in the state has come a long ways. I can remember when black athletics in the state was as low as it can get. You didn't have money to hire coaches. Usually the vo-ag.

Clark: teacher and the coach were more or less the same person. He would be the coach, but he usually didn't have time to coach and we would wind up coaching yourself. You found a lot of school at that time that was not ethical. I guess that our school was the exception. The students actually played.

Harrison: This is at Durant?

Clark: At Durant and at Mount Olive. There were a few outlaw players in Holmes County, but that wasn't only students. A lot of places that you go to the guys would hitch a mule, he would be out there plowing and when it was time for the ballgame he would hitch his mule. He could be working at the sawmill, he would jump down from the sawmill. He maybe would have been out of school four five years, but he would come on across there and play ball.

Harrison: For the school?

Clark: For the school team.

Harrison: Did you have aspirations to play during your high school years?

Clark: Oh yes.

Harrison: You wanted to but you didn't. What kind of role did you play? Were you a cheerleader or did you just sit on the side lines?

Clark: Since I couldn't play I would come back home and see about my mother on the weekends. She was ill, so I would come home since I couldn't play.

Harrison: Were the games on the weekends?

Clark: The games were on Friday night. We didn't have any day games. I would wait my turn until basketball season started.

Harrison: What position did you play?

Clark: I played a guard, but positions were different that they are now. The taller individuals played on the defensive board and the smallest individuals played up front like they do now. The only difference is when you got the ball off the board, you still handled the ball. You didn't go under to become the forward or the center. The tallest things on the team were the people who brought the ball down and gave it to the little boys. I played a guard in high school.

Harrison: Were you ever the man on the team? I don't know how it was in those days, but were you popular?

Clark: Oh yes, I was. I was a good hustler, ball handler, the same thing I was in college, a good hustler and ball handler. I only shot the ball when I had to. For one year, maybe my junior or senior year, I had a 100% free throw shooting average for the whole year I didn't miss a free throw. I guess that is a record that is unmatched, but we don't have anything in writing on it.

Harrison: But that is your word.

Clark: If we could find the scorebook, it would verify that.

Harrison: Probably your school mates would?

Clark: I don't know.

Harrison: Who kept the scorebooks?

Clark: Some of the girls on the basketball team. We would have girl from our team and they would have a scorer. If we were the home team, our press would be the official score and if we were there, then their press would be the official score.

Harrison: You played basketball in college as well?

Clark: I played for a year and a half in college, but I had a scholarship in track. My tenth, eleventh, and twelfth grade year I worked in addition to going to school. I worked at night. My first job in Durant at night was at the Durant Hotel. I worked from 7:00 p.m. until 7:00 a.m. I still went to school full time. I got a chance to sleep some. I was the porter, operating the hotel elevator and if nobody came in I got a chance to sleep. I had to go to get the mail every night about 1:00 o'clock. They always told me to make sure that when the elevator got to the top to get off the handle if it was manually operated or it would go right throw the top of the building. I didn't know if that was true or not, but one night I found myself on the elevator as high as it could go and I didn't know how it got there. That is why I quit that job. I was afraid that I was going to get into the elevator and kill myself.

Harrison: Were you really serious at that age about that?

Clark: Yes. I thought-- I guess I was asleep when I got on the elevator and when I woke I was on the elevator, but I didn't know how I got there. They really had said, I don't know if is true, but that you would have to get off it when

Clark: you get to the top of it, you can't stay on it or you would go threw the top of the building. After I left there I started to work at a white night spot north of town. The fellow that ran the place is named Black Jack. I worked there for a short while. He was a real tough fellow. He sold it . . . I didn't like that. After they closed up every night about 12:00 o'clock, he would do unusual things like running around finding little specks. We were trying to run a buffer, but we didn't know how to run it to clean the dance floor. I left him and started to work--I went down south of town to another white night spot which was the 51 Grill. The 51 Grill, Mrs. Mable Ellis was from Ebenezer and her brother and my father gew up hunting rabbits and possum together. She hired me and gave me a job with her. I worked with her about a year and a half until another colored fellow came along.

He would come there every Thursday night from Lexington on ~~Sw~~ Bingo night to help me hop cars and work around on the outside. This fellow and I got into a debate about the make of a car. The fellow wanted to jump on me. He went and told the white fellow and brought him from Lexington. The white fellow came out there and wanted to whip me. I wasn't going to let him whip me. I squared off on him. I had to get a brick and threaten to hit him to keep him from attacking me. I left and went home and the next day I went back and told the man's wife, Mrs. Mable Ellis, what had happen. . . . he didn't have to come over there and they would stop him. I knew things weren't like it is now with me threatening a white fellow. If I had gone back I would be subjected to be found in the Big Black River. I didn't go back to work there. I made it until I graduated without working.

Harrison: Why were you working in the first place, you were a farmer?

Clark: I was working, but we were doing a little farming at the time. My father was teaching school making about \$95.00 a month as a principal. He had to go to summer school. He didn't have his college degree at that time. It was impossible to be in education and make a living off the farm doing the same time. I was doing that to supplement my income and so I could have something to pay my room and board with, buy clothes and shoes, or just whatever I needed to go school with.

Harrison: When you were at Durant you were living with someone?

Clark: I was living with a lady from Ebenezer who had married a fellow in Durant. She knew my people. I might add that I knew her nephew. He was a friend of mine. He had got suspended from school.

Harrison: What did he do to get expelled from school?

Clark: The Agriculture teacher wanted to whip him, but he refused to let the teacher whip him. He had to get a stick to keep the teacher off him. One of the principals came out there to see what was going on. He was going to force the boy to let the teacher whip him. He wouldn't let the teacher whip him so he had to leave school. That is when I started staying with him.

Harrison: So, you were living together?

Clark: Yes.

Harrison: Do you know the family's name?

Clark: The lady's name was Ruby Powell. She was a Ruby Pilgram before she was married. Her husband's name is S. Powell. A lot of people around Ebenezer were named names like "H" and "S". I knew that you were going to ask what the S stood for, but it just stands for S.

When we graduated from high school, we had class night. I was suppose to give the class proficiency. It was prepared by my teacher, Mrs. Sullivan. She had written that she forsee such and such person doing this or that twenty years from then. Although I delivered the proficiency, I wasn't at all pleased with what she had written about me. I can't remember what she had written, but whatever it was it was something that was far below my aspirations. It was something that a Clark would never think about becoming. My father was at class night. He didn't like what she had written about me either. It made me even more ambitious. It really showed me what Mrs. Sullivan thought of me.

Harrison: Yet, she had you to deliver the proficiency.

Clark: It has been a long time ago, nearly thirty-five years.

Harrison: When you think back on your high school years, what had the greatest impact on you?



Clark: I don't know.

Harrison: Being left-handed, did you consider that as being a handicap.

Clark: I had a great uncle that was an Alcornite. During his years of teaching he didn't allow his students to use their left hand. His name was Lewis Jones. So when I was around him, I couldn't use my left hand. He was a very smart man. He willed his library to me. I still have it. He would always make me use my right hand. As soon as he would leave, I would start back using my left hand.

My parents knew that he was wrong, but it was just the custom that you didn't question the senior member of you family. They didn't want him to stop me from using my left hand, but they couldn't tell him to stop making me use my right hand. He came where we were playing ball and made me use my right hand. It became a handicap trying to write legible with my right hand then go back and use my left hand.

Harrison: This sort of thing can cause embrassment, did it put any pressure on you in high school?

Clark: Being left handed gave me a little prestige.

Harrison: Did your school have a band or choir?

Clark: We had band in the eight and ninth grade. We had a very good choir. My Aunt Doris, Uncle Henry's wife, was the director. I don't have any musical talents, but everyone else in my family can sing and play the piano.

Harrison: Did you ever have any musical training?

Clark: No.

END SIDE II TAPE I

Clark: The only instrument I ever played was the flute. It was the kind that you make out of a fishing cane. You would cut off one end then put some holes in it. Then you had yourself a flute. I learned to play the flute very well.

Harrison: At what age?

Clark: I started playing the flute a long time ago. As you got older you would get a larger flute.

Harrison: How did you learn to play?

Clark: I learned from the other boys and from my father. You don't see many home-made flutes any more. My boys have flutes, but they were bought from a store.

Harrison: You never taught them how to make a flute?

Clark: No, the next time I go to the country I will make them one.

Harrison: Your second grader would probably appreciate that.

Clark: They love to do things like that. I taught them how to plait a whip. We use to drive the drive the teams with a whip. You can plait a good whip from elm bark. I have taught them how to make a sling shot from a corn stalk. It would give you more leverage.

Harrison: You are talking about a corn stalk. What would you do with it?

Clark: Put a hole in it, put a pellet in there and throw it.

Harrison: Are you talking about the whole stalk?

Clark: No, you don't throw the stalk, you hold the stalk and the pellets comes out. For example, if your arm is 30' and you have a corn stalk about 40', that gives you 70' of leverage. So you can throw it a lot further.

Harrison: What other kinds of things did you do?

Clark: No more than what other boys in Ebenezer did. We rode trees; climb up the tree and ride down. We rode bulls if your family was fortunate enough to have cows.

We would get together and ride trees, play baseball, go swimming, go hunting, or do whatever we decided to do. We also went snake hunting.

Harrison: Really?

Clark: Yes. You would go to a place where you knew the snakes were. When they held up their head, you would shoot them with the sling shots. They use to call them nigger-killers.

Harrison: The sling shots?

Clark: Yes. To make the sling shot you would find a stick or either cut a peice of board into a "U" with a handle then take a old tire and cut a peice of rubber off it then get a string, after you put a trench in the stick, tie the string. Put the leather on the other end of the string, then connect. When the snake held up its head, you would let the peice of steel go and hope that you hit him on the head. We were not

Clark: to successful, but if you ever got one, that gave you bragging rights.

Harrison: I thought you were talking about rattlesnake hunting?

Clark: No, we didn't hunt rattlesnake. We would ~~hunt~~ water moccasin.

Harrison: You would do this as a sport?

Clark: Yes, just for a sport.

Harrison: You weren't afraid?

Clark: No, because we wouldn't get close enough to it to be afraid. If you ever wounded the snake, he would go under the water and the water would sting him and he would have to come back up. The fun part was watching him when he came up.

Harrison: Didn't they ever jump out of the water?

Clark: Sure, they would get after you too. The water would be stinging him so bad that you had a chance to kill him.

Harrison: How old were you when you stop hunting snakes or shooting a sling shot?

Clark: I stop when I was around 15 or 16.

Harrison: You were still in high school?

Clark: When I got in high school we played basketball, rode bicycles, or some other kind of activity. Another sport we had was buggy frame. We would take the harness off the buggy and get some old tires, then push the buggy to top of a steep hill everyone would go down the hill in the buggy. Everyone had a chance to drive, but if you weren't a good driver you often had wrecks. We had lots of them.

Harrison: Did anyone get hurt?

Clark: No. They would get skinned up, but nothing serious.

Harrison: It seems like kids were made different in those days. We were talking about the field day earlier. What was it like?

Clark: That is when we would go and have basketball games, running, high jumps, standing high jumps, broad jumps, sack races, potatoe races, three leg races, wheel barrell races, etc. The three leg race is when two boys put their arms around each other and put a belt around one leg and then ren. The sack race is where the boys runs on their hands and they have their legs up around the other person side. Then you had the singing contest, the speaking contest and the

Clark: spelling contest. Out at Mount Olive, we had a community show or what you might call a fair. They exhibited things that the girls had made in Home Economics, things that the boys had made such as games etc. My hammer handle was on exhibit. They tried to make it so that everyone had something to show off at the fair.

Harrison: What time of year would they have the fair?

Clark: It was in the fall of the year. The festival was around Thanksgiving. The field day was always in the spring of the year. We had May Day. Everyone would wear red colors and wrap the flag around the May pole.

Harrison: How would they do the May pole?

Clark: About 15 or 20 people were selected to tie strings around the may-pole. Each person would take turns wrapping the string around the pole. Some would be going clockwise and the others would be going counter clockwise.

Harrison: Do you remember any of the music they use to have?

Clark: No.

Harrison: We never did that in Brandon. The community fair in the fall is sponsored by the school or a county agent?

Clark: By the school.

Harrison: Do you know of any outside person who would have had an impact on the community?

Clark: No. The leadership and inspiration of the community had to be generated. The principal of the school is looked upon as the leader in the community. This was the time when professional person were respected by the community. Professor Ike Montgomery was principal of the school before my Uncle Henry and Aunt Doris were there.

Harrison: Were there community fairs like this in other communities?

Clark: Just field day.

Harrison: Have you ever heard of any community fairs around North, Mississippi other than at Mount Olive? Did you win a ribbon at field day or was that community day?

Clark: I won ribbons in both palces. The ribbon I won in the field day was the exhibit I had with the hammer handle and single tree.

Harrison: Which event did you have most fun?

Clark: The field day because I like competing.

Harrison: The community fair must have been mostly an exhibit and not any activities?

Clark: Yes.

Harrison: Did other schools come other than Mount Olive School?

Clark: Not that I can remember. There were people there from other communities. Other schools like Chapel, Holy Grove, Union, and Shady Grove came when we had field day.

I don't remember telling you, but my favorite sport is fox hunting. We would catch 30 or 40 horses, get some dogs and go to some designated place and make the dogs chase the foxes. We would keep up with the dogs on our horses. We use to have a large group of people going, now a lot of those people have died and our group has gotten smaller and smaller. I still try to go hunting every opportunity I get.

Harrison: What excites you about fox hunting, is it the chase?

Clark: I just love to chase. That has been my favorite sport for some time.

Harrison: Want the fox attack you?

Clark: No. Lots of folks think that. People around Ebenezer believe that if a lady was pregnant the fox would attack her. But that wasn't anything but hearsay. A lot of people around here believe in hoo-doo and fortune telling.

Harrison: There were three events, field day, community day, and May day?

Clark: Field day is when all the other schools were invited. That was strictly a competitive situation. May pole day was when the school had an activity involving wrapping the may pole. The fall festival was a community wide activity.

Harrison: What has replaced these activities in school today?

Clark: I guess the replacement for field day is the basketball tournament and track meets. The band and chorus festival is still in existence in another form.

Harrison: Do you see any relative values being lost?

Clark: The community fair is definitely a value that is lost.

Clark: After school integrated, white folks didn't want no PTA because they didn't want the blacks to become involved in any of the activities. A lot black folks didn't know any better, they didn't want their children in school. Since 1953, the school and the home has had very little communication. We need to try to establish some kind of communication between the two.

Harrison: Do you think we can revive it?

Clark: We have to. My philosophy is that we can not receive quality education from our schools until we establish contact between home and the school.

Harrison: With that positive note, we'll call this series of interview to a close. Thank you.

Clark: Okay.

END OF INTERVIEW