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JACKSON STATE UNIVERSITY
JACKSON, MISSISSIPPI
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

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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 made available for purposes of research, for instructional use, for publication, or for other related purposes.

I, Michael Levert
Carl C. Myers, 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.

Carl C. Myers
Interviewee Signature

3-28-78
Date

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ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

THE FARISH STREET COMMUNITY
Jackson, Mississippi

INTERVIEWEE: Carl G. Myers
INTERVIEWER: Michael Leveritt
DATE: March 28, 1978
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This is Michael Leveritt and we're interviewing Carl G. Myers, 324 North Farish Street, Jackson, Mississippi.

This is Myers Coffe Company.

L: Now Mr. Myers, would you state your name and spell it for us on tape?

M: I'm Carl G. Myers, C A R L G. MYERS. I'm presently the sole owner of Myers Coffee Company, 324 North Farish Street, Jackson, Mississippi. The business was started in the fall of 1933 by an older brother, Herman L. Myers. That's H E R M A N L. MYERS, and he had it until he retired in 1972. He is presently living on the reservoir and enjoying retirement. He started the business as a retail coffee business, basically wholesale. The older people remembered that in 1933 we were in the depths of depression. He saw after awhile that he was not going to be able to make it in the coffee business only, so he started looking for something else. Since he had the roaster to roast coffee, he could roast peanuts in these as well. On his first purchase of peanuts he bought 25 lbs. or raw peanuts from Russell Company located down on Gallatin Street.

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M: As time went along, I remember him telling about when he finally took the big plunge, he ordered a whole 100 lbs. sack of raw peanuts at one time. He remembers that . At that time he sold coffee for 15¢ a pound and 2 pounds for 25¢. He would run a special sometimes on a Saturday and he'd give a pound of sugar free with two lbs. of coffee. So you could get 2 lbs. of fresh roasted peanuts, fresh ground pure coffee and a pound of sugar for 25¢. Now that probably sounds unbelievable to this generation. It's kind of hard for me to believe but I remember those days rather well myself. You could go down the street toward Capitol Street a few doors to Daddy Reeds place and get a bowl of black eyed peas and rice with a little meat in it for a nickel, a big bowl. Daddy Reed is dead now. The little building that he operated in is gone. It's where the driveway to Seal Lilly Ice Cream goes through there now. Back in those days Farish Street was one of the better retail streets in Jackson for certain types of businesses. The one reason that we located up here at that time was because in the next block north of here there was a lot of vacant land and rural Black and White people came and parked there and would walk to town to Farish and Capitol Street. Of course at that time Capitol Street was Jackson as far as retail business was concerned. To walk from the parking area to Capitol Street they naturally came up Farish Street, which is what enhanced the location for a retail business.

As time went along, after a couple of years he and his wife fixed

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M: up the back of the building and lived back there for several years.

While living back there, their first child was born _____ Love Myers. Back in those days Black newspapers printed Black news and White newspapers printed White news. Basically one of the things that he and his wife still treasure to this day was an article in The Mississippi Enterprise that put a notice in the paper that the Myers had given birth to their first child and that they resided at 324 North Farish Street. So the root of the Myers is pretty deep on Farish Street.

As time went along the business prospered as a retail business. It sold an awful lot of coffee and peanuts. Peanuts go to be a bigger part of the business and still is. Back in those days it was just hard for a lot of people to get something to eat. He had the street peddlers mainly young Blacks, some Whites. I use to be a peddler on the street at one time. I sold peanuts out on the streets in the City of Jackson to make something to eat. You could imagine the job of keeping up with 40 assistant boys which he had at one time that he sold to on credit. A lot of the boys that sold peanuts on the street since then have done well in the business world and when they got older a lot of them left Jackson and when they would come back to Jackson they would always come by to see us. If he was not here they always wanted to know about him. Of course a lot of them I knew and a lot of them I didn't. They always laugh about selling a bag of peanuts for a nickel and they only made 2¢ off of it. This is how the things went along and everything was

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M: real cheap and stayed that way until about the 1950s' when inflation really started hitting.

He had one fellow who worked for him prior to going into the service of WWII, Willie Terry, who lived with his grandmother. All during his time in the service he sent money back here to my brother to put up for him for safe keeping. He accumulated a pretty good chunk of money in consideration of what a dollar was worth back in those days. Most people knew him as Jabo. Well Jabo came back here and worked in the store for several years after World War II. He went to California for awhile and then came back here. His money was still here in a savings institution. His brother had the book for it. When he came back he had an opportunity to buy a restaurant here. He bought a restaurant up on the corner of Mill and Monument.

L: What was the name of that restaurant?

M: Max's Place. He's still up there running that business. He bought it and paid cash for it. He's a hard working fellow, always has been and he's doing alright up there. Of course in recent years, during the war years it was necessary for him to close down for two or three months at a time because he was unable to get anything to sell. I wasn't here then, I was in the service and I came back in 1945. I came into the business here and been here ever since with the exception of 5 months. What happened was that other places in the country, (retail businesses) started falling in the late 1940s'. Due to the fact that shopping centers had opened up on the perimeter

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M: of the city, seeing this we changed the direction of the company and got into concession supplies in the late 1940s. This is basically what we're in today, wholesale concession supplies. We did not even sell coffee, haven't for about ten years. It got to a point where there wasn't sufficient volume for justifying the space and the money and time. We sold 2,000 lbs in a whole, so we quit, but we are still operating under the name of Myers Coffee Company and will continue to as long as the Myers are running it because it's just a name. You don't throw it away because what ever it cost...during my last time here I've seen a lot of changes up and and down Farish Street, some good and some bad. It kind of disturbs me to see the deterioration that has gone on and is still going on. I don't know that I have an answer for one single thing that would prove or help maintain conditions of Farish Street and make it better, but I think that if I was to say one thing it would do more to help stabilize Farish Street and downtown Jackson for the better is more strict law enforcement. Some of my customers have asked me to move from this area due to things that go on in the street and I have not and do not intend to move if it's at all possible. In fact, I would like to improve the physical aspects of the businesses more and have plans of that nature.

L: Talking about the area. . .

M: I feel like maybe when the street that's coming through High Street goes cross Farish and up Roach Street to the New Federal Building, the traffic in and out on that street will be a big help to turn around the direction that downtown Jackson has been going. Now

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- M: most of the real improvement of downtown Jackson has been on the upper end of Capitol Street and none on the lower end towards the depot. Hopefully this is going on very well. There again my personal feeling is with, particularly during business hours, a good strict law enforcement on traffic and other things and to keep traffic moving and to keep the sidewalks and areas where the people would come to downtown Jackson to shop after 5:00 without any fear of being embarrassed or harrassed in any matter. In my opinion it would help stabilize and improve downtown Jackson.
- L: In the past there has been an area (speaking of prostitution) called the "Red Light District." Are you familiar with where this district is located?
- M: I konw where the old timers told me that it was located. I believe at Cohea Street going north from here it would be the second street to the left. There use to be, what the old timers told me, there use to be two-story frame houses up there and they were rather fancy naughty houses of prostitution. They didn't operate in the same manner that they do today. Today the prostitutes make their contacts and go to the hotel or motel room somewhere or a rooming house. Back in those days they had just an out-and-out house of prostitution. I know that one of them houses burned down, I don't know about the others but I remember that the old timers told me about the history of those buildings up there in those days.
- L: There were White and Black women in there? I understand that White and Black men visited this area?

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M: Yes. What was said is that it was a solid Black area residential wise up there and that any White man that went up there didn't have to worry about their wife catching him cause their wife wasn't gonna be in the neighborhood. But all that I know about that is hear say because most of that was phased out before I came into the picture. I don't have a lot of knowledge on that.

L: What about an area called "The Jungle"? Have you ever heard of that?

M: I would assume that you would be referring to the alley back over here. What's the name of that alley Ed?

ED: Heart's Alley.

M: Heart's Alley. Ed here use to carry mail up here for years.

L: Oh really?

M: He's retired and works here part-time. Heart's Alley. Any place nicknamed qualifies "The Jungle," that would be it I think in this immediate vicinity. It was rather raw.

L: Where is Heart's Alley?

M: It was behind the Big Apple Inn, it's torn down now. All of it's torn down now but it use to run over behind the Big Apple between Mill and Farish Street about a block north of here. The church bought some property in there and tore a lot of it down. It's a parking lot now. Heart's Alley was known then as _____ so to speak. But it was life in the raw and winos and just like you named it, you see most everything over here. The alley goes down in there is Brown's Alley. It is much better now than it

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M: use to be. The buildings have been straightened up. Directly across the street from us when we first came up here there was not anything on that side of the street except frame houses and on the corner where the Alamo Theatre is now there was a frame commercial building that had a shoe repair shop, a little cafe, and this and that and the other.

In the 1950s' Mr. Oscar Laymon tore all of that out and put in the Alamo Theatre where it is now located. There has been some commercial rental brick buildings put up across the street where there use to be frame houses.

L: Do you remember another one called the "Silk Stocking"?

M: I don't remember it in reference as referred to this area here.

L: It referred to the area where the wealthier Blacks lived. I think that would be Hamilton, _____ Street. There is a street back here with some big homes. Dr. _____

M: I really and truly couldn't fill you in on that. Now from Griffin Street to Farish Street east it was always White residential. Now Hamilton Street (east) went up so far as Black and then it became White. A lot of the houses and things that use to be there as I said were torn down for a state office complex. Most of these houses up there were White, but I really and truly don't know the exact area that you're talking about as far as downtown Jackson is concerned. I know that out on Woodrow Wilson in that area out

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M: some of the more prominent Blacks had homes out there.

L: That was all rural at one time though. You were talking about some of the businesses listed along the street, do you remember the Crystal Palace?

M: Oh yes. It was in the 100 block of Farish Street.

L: What was the Crystal Palace?

M: It was one of the better Black restaurants at that time. It and Blackstone was in the 100 block of Farish Street where they're now building the Federal Building. They were real fine restaurants. They were fixed real nice. The Blackstone was a real fine restaurant in the 100 block of Farish Street. I don't know how many times the business changed hands but some several years ago the people running the Blackstone, I believe they were across the street from me. They run a restaurant there now.

L: What's the name?

M: They were not the owners back in those days.

L: What about the bank, was there a Black bank? The American Bank over on Farish Street?

M: I don't have a recollection of a Black bank. The first and real money establishing bank for Blacks to my knowledge was an insurance savings and loan out on Lynch Street, out where the neighborhood forerunners. . . I wouldn't say that they didn't have one down here but I don't recollect any.

L: What other business do you recall being on Farish Street?

M: Hunt and Whitaker who are now located in the Jackson Mall and up

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M: off I-55 North, they use to be on the corner of Farish and Amite where the Ferguson Furniture Company is. They moved across the street on the west of the 100 block of Farish Street and remained there for many years. They finally moved in a store in the Jackson Mall and one on I-55 North. They were one of the older businesses. Another one that has gone by the way side is Home Dining Room which is located on the corner of North Farish Street and Hamilton. Mr. Dan Robinson and his wife ran it years and years. They kind of got old and sold it 2, 3, or 4 years ago I guess. A Black boy bought it and he moved it across to the corner up here where it is presently closed and out of business. One of the old small businesses was a place they're talking about called Daddy Reeds. He was a fellow in statue but. . . I guess a kind of a hole in the wall restaurant very seldom has any help. He cooked and served himself but I guarantee you you got your money's worth when you went in there. Reeds has died and gone on. They were here in this block. Three of the oldest businesses continue operation under family ownership on Farish Street. Some of the older businesses were put out when the development started down in the 100 block of Farish Street. They have moved some of those businesses. A lot of them that are here now are post World War II years. There are a lot of them who left who were here prior to World War II.

L: What year did you come here to work?

M: I came in as an adult in 1945. I had worked down here with my brother part-time, just casual working. I sold peanuts on the street like everybody else. I put out hand bills and all that

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- M: kind of stuff for him and that's the reason why I say I know the background of the business from the day it started. Back in those days you could ride the bus anywhere in the city for a nickel. He saved that nickel. When he first started he walked down to the 600 block of W. Silas Brown where we lived. That's a pretty good walk to save a nickel. A nickel was sorta big in those days.
- L: When do you think the deterioration of the area began?
- M: Well the deterioration actually began in the 1950s' when the businesses started moving out to the shopping centers. A lot of businesses that were here moved out and followed other businesses. We had a pretty good walk in business. We would be gone in the week but we depended on that because the retail business was just not here anymore. We're basically wholesale. Farish Street and Capitol Street were retail businesses.
- L: Was Farish Street a one way then? When was it made a one way?
- M: I'd say eight or ten years ago it was made a one-way.
- L: Would you say it had any affect you think one way or the other?
- M: It didn't seem to after the people got pass the little confusion about it. I don't see that as being detrimental but I may be wrong.
- L: Do you see very many Whites that come down Farish Street to shop or are there just a few that come here now?
- M: Quite a few of them come to my place. It's quite a few that come to the 200 block of North Farish Street. There's a new furniture store and used ones down there. In this block here there's quite a few Whites that come to Mr. Johnson's tailoring shop down here.

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- M: He's a very highly respected tailor. An awful lot of prominent people come in his place. A lot of White people come in here to my business.
- L: Do you think having a business on Farish Street hurts your trade?
- M: It's bound to have some detrimental effect if I were to say. On Amite Street in there, I feel like I would have more White retail customers than I have now. Might not have as many Black retail customers as I have not but we're basically wholesale instead of retail. We're satisfied where we are now.
- M: The Whites were moving out. There were a lot of White customers. It wasn't a matter of race or color. It's just the fact that when the shopping centers were built more and more people started going there. We use to have a grocery store down the street on the corner, they finally gave up.
- L: What grocery store was this?
- M: Ed Simmons started it as a Silver Saver back in 1933 about the time my brother started his company. Then he got off into the poultry business and his brother-in-law ran the store. He finally changed it over to the Star Market store. After his wife died he sold out to Professor Sanders, a Black society school teacher. He only had it about a year then he quit. The people were going to larger stores for better prices and wider selections. The law of economics shot him down.
- L: Do you think there are more or less people living here now in this immediate area?

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- M: Oh there are fewer by far. You take Hamilton Street, which is still pretty well occupied. Up there where the Sun-N-Sand is and the office buildings, all of that use to be heavily populated. Most of them were either rooming houses or boarding houses or something like that. Up where the State Office buildings are on the north side of High Street, all of that use to be boarding houses. In fact, my brother use to sell his _____ at the boarding house upstairs. He did a tremendous business. So as these things faded out our customers faded out. When I came here in 1945 I was young and full of vigor and vitality. It got to the point where either you did something about the oppression or you left. We were fortunate that we were able to get the direction of our business developed on a level that we have been able to continue on. I don't know if there is anyway possible to develop the fact of that. There were enough people on Farish Street at that time to develop the retail business. Saturday use to be a big trading day back then. It was a chore to walk from here to Capitol Street on Saturday morning cause the sidewalk was so crowded.
- L: I find myself coming back to downtown Jackson to shop more. I'm sure that others may eventually come to that point. I personally think with a little work downtown could become a shopping area but it's going to take a lot of concentration on the entire downtown not just on the upper end like you said. They've been concentrating on the upper end of downtown and they've neglected the

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- L: lower end but it is as much a part of downtown Jackson as the upper end. I think that maybe eventually something will be done.
- M: The old Edwards Hotel has about as much history as far as Jackson is concerned as any building in town.
- L: Right. We've been talking about that building and how it could be used for getting people downtown. That's the life of a downtown area, to get people there and keep people moving and having free flowing streets you gotta have parking, you gotta have a place where they can come and feel comfortable. As you say, and we are striving to see that happen. Do you remember anything about land owners here major land owners?
- M: Oh yes. As a matter of fact, the property that we were in we did not own that property. We rent and have ever since 1933. John Hart Asher was and still is a very prominent property owner in the city of Jackson. He owns property up on Capitol Street and all over Jackson. Just how much he owns I don't know, but he owns a lot of it. Now the property next door to us was originally owned and built by Mr. McKewen and his grandson. Mr. McKewen was one of the earlier pioneers.
- L: How do you spell McKewen?
- M: Mc K E W E N. I saw in the paper this morning where Curtis was involved in _____ back down here. Of course Burr Brown building over across the street is named for him. Brown Alley was named after him.

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- M: He owned a little bit of property and he has been dead for many years. Dr. McCoy was Black. I don't know if he was a physician or a dentist. He was a professional man but he owned a lot of property up in the 100 block of Farish Street and a lot of other places. I believe it was him that owned a lot of property up there on Old Canton Road. It was all farm land in those days. The W _____ owned a good bit of property up here but I don't know what his is. I don't know whether he goes back to (pre) World War II days or not.
- L: How do you spell his name?
- M: I don't know. He and his older brother. . . His brother brought some investor into the business since he moved their office from across the street to the Western Union Building on Capitol Street. They owned a lot of property and still do down on Farish Street. John Hart Asher is one that owns a lot of property.
- L: I guess I've taken up enough of your time.
- M: Well I know my brother would have enjoyed talking to you if he was down here but I have basically covered his day prior to my coming in here. I have talked to him and I heard him talk about it a lot. I would love to see Farish Street come back again maybe as a retail business but . . .
- L: Right. It means a lot to a lot of people. I hate the city does not know that and I think they are coming to realize that there are people who are interested in saving this area as a historic area as a good area of Jackson. It takes a lot of time for these

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L: things to catch on. Maybe, eventually. . . . Well I thank you
for your help.

M: You're quite welcome. I was glad to contribute a little bit.