

Yes

JACKSON Y. W. C. A.
and
MISSISSIPPI DEPARTMENT of ARCHIVES and HISTORY
and
JACKSON STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
THE FARISH STREET HISTORIC DISTRICT

BUSINESSMAN IN THE HISTORIC DISTRICT

O. H. 81.67

DR. DAVID WHITE

Interviewed
by

Mary Street and Irene Hampton

on

September 29, 1981

JACKSON STATE UNIVERSITY

JACKSON, MISSISSIPPI

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

INTERVIEW AGREEMENT

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

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

I, Dr. David White 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.

Dr. D. W. White
Interviewee (Signature)

12-9-82
Date

INTRODUCTION

Dr. David White opened his optometry business in Jackson, Mississippi on October 17, 1951. He was the first Black Optometrist in the state of Mississippi. His real dream was to become a literary person which would have cost a great deal of money to produce his works. Therefore, he pursued a profession in pre-med to accomplish his goal. Dr. White was also affiliated with the NAACP and is a veteran of World War II.

Dr. White told of his business as an optometrist in the Farish Street area. He was the only Black Optometrist in Jackson at that time. It took him about three years to get his business out of the red. Dr. White often used the church as a media for advertising his business profession.

INTERVIEWEE: Dr. David White
INTERVIEWER: Mary Street and Irene Hampton
DATE OF INTERVIEW: September 29, 1981
O.H.

Street: My name is Mary Street of 109 West Hamilton Street, Jackson, Mississippi. This is my sister, Miss Irene Hampton of East Davis, Jackson, Mississippi. Tonight, September 29, 1981, we are going to interview Dr. White who also has a business in the Farish Street Historical District.

Dr. White, would you begin your interview by telling us what year did you come to the Farish Street Historical District for business?

White: I opened October 17th, 1951.

Street: Why did you come to the area and what was the business like? What's the difference between the business now than it was then?

White: I came to Jackson because Mississippi was my home state and Jackson was the largest town or city within the state that offered the best possibilities for development. At that time there wasn't a Black Optometrist in the State of Mississippi. I was a pioneer in this field. I found it rather difficult in breaking in **you** might say.

I used the church as a means of introducing myself to the public. I had worked as a chaplain's assistant; in the Armed Forces and I had some contact with the ministers. I used the method of going to the church as to making it known that there was a Negro or black in the field.

Finally, after about three years, it did take the full three years for me to even--I would say pay off to the amount of not making a profit, but just pay for itself. Then I did fairly well for a good number of years. At that time Farish Street was the hub of Negro activities. I enjoyed being on the street, its bussle and what it meant to Negro life as a whole, almost as much as I did introducing myself and finally coming into, I would say possibly, into my home in pioneering as an Optometrist.

The main difference in Farish Street now than as it was then is that it no longer represents the hub of anything except, I would say the history. It is still our historical foundation when it comes to the Black Negro activity. But now it is no longer the way to the hub of town or hub of town itself. There is very little Negro business and activity on the street.

Street: Did you have any white patients?

White: I haven't had many white patients over the whole thirty years that I have been practicing. I have had a few. The first few white patients came about during the Civil Rights activity. The larger part of it took place right above my office. It was the hub place of the Civil Rights activities. Some of the White Civil Rights workers there were sent to me for Optometry. I served as the fixer of glasses and whatever was needed to white and black that were in Jackson during that time. After that, once in a while I had a white patient, but I never exactly went out for or tried to get any white patients. I remember when one of the white patients who wasn't connected with the Civil Rights activity came in. I was almost afraid to wait on her because I didn't know whether it was some trap or what have you. There was a lawyer upstairs, a Judge from Detroit, and I mentioned it to him. He was a Civil Rights Judge. He said, "If that is what you want, go ahead and nothing will come of it, There's nothing to be afraid of!" Sure enough, there wasn't.

Street: What was it like to examine your first customer?

White: What was it like?

Street: Yes, what was it like for you to examine your first customer for glasses?

White: My first patient for glasses, I think in my previous interview I told about the first dollar and a half that I made came from placing a temple on Mr. Moore's glasses. He's who opened me up. He was my first patient, but he didn't get a refraction. It seemed for a good number of weeks that I wasn't going to get a patient as a refraction. You don't really consider that you have a patient until, as a whole, you give a refraction. That is a complete examination. I said well, since it seems that I am going to pitch a blank from that point of view here in Jackson, I am going to give a refraction to someone. So, in looking around, I saw there was a man who is now selling peanuts downtown. He told me in passing that his name was Lofton. His name is Lofton because he is still doing it today in the same spot that he did thirty years ago. There has been a write-up as a colorful figure, about Lofton. He told me, "Dr. White, I need some glasses." I said, "do?"

He said, "yes." I told him, when you come by tonight, you come in. So, that night when he came by--he just dragged himself along the street--I heard this knocking on the door and I went to it. It was about 5:30 p.m., near my closing hour.

White: I said, yes, Lofton come on in. I brought him in and helped him get into the chair and refracted him. So I said, now, you are my first real patient and if I don't have another in Jackson, you have been one. I was quite happy about that, I said, I would have done one in Jackson. After that, I did get a few, but my first was Lofton, a patient of charity . . . not really advertisement because I didn't get advertisement from it, but to say that I was engaging in my profession.

Street: Were you the only Black in your field in the Farish Street Historical District?

White: I was the first Negro, Black Optometrist in the State of Mississippi. At present there is only one other Black Optometrist, in the state. That is Dr. Lindsey Johnson, connected with the Comprehensive Health Care. The two of us, as I understand are still the two Optometrists in the whole state, Black Optometrist.

Street: Were there very many hazardous problems to the eyesight during that time, you know, like glaucoma?

White: When I first began in Optometry, I did not give the glaucoma test. There is a specification that one has to be a Medical Doctor first, in order to give the drops needed to make the eye--the enesthetic before administering the pressure test for glaucoma. It wasn't until the invention of the non-contact themometer that I gave a glaucoma test. It was, as I understand it, one of the first two optometrists doctors as a whole, as I understand it, to have the non-contact themometer in the city. Since that time I have been giving the non-contact themometer test for glaucoma.

Street: Would some of you in the audience like to ask Dr. White some questions about the Farish Street Historical District?

Question: Why did you choose your particular field?

White: To be quite frank, I don't know whether I mentioned this in the previous interview or not, but I am a frustrated writer. Most of my formal education has been in the field of literature in order to write. I have a degree in English Literature. I have been to other schools and taken up courses in literature and in history for writing, in several of them. Even after deciding to take up a profession, I wanted to be a pure literary person. That is one thing that isn't bought and that I would need some money to live off. So, I'd better get, I thought another type of job to live on then I could write as I saw fit. So I went back into the undergraduate school and took up pre-med. After

White: finishing literature, I was interrupted by the armed forces of WW II. I came back and finished in pre-med. Then I wasn't able to get into medical school. The competition was so stiff right after WW II because there were so many applying and the government was furnishing their way in. I was told that I would have to wait another year. Rather than wait until I was accepted, I broke my glasses and went to have them repaired. The optometrist said, "Why don't you take up optometry and stop running around trying to get into some other profession. I make a good living out of it." So I said, "well maybe."

That fall I entered the Chicago College of Optometry and finished. Of course whenever I finished in some type of profession I intended to take it to Mississippi. I came back to the state and took the Board, becoming your first black optometrist. That's how it happened.

Question: What year was that?

White: Nineteen hundred and fifty-one (1951)

Question: What I wanted to ask is about the attitude of the black community toward a black man coming in as an optometrist?

White: Just as any other field, I believe, if you are new the people are somewhat hesitant. If you are new and in another different race than that race that has been practicing that, then there you are breaking a barrier. They doubt whether you can do the same thing that the whites can do. Though the whites are the one that give you the work and you took the Board out. So that was the general idea and the impression that I had to go against when I came into Jackson. As I've said, it took a long time to break that down. I'm not sure that it is completely broken down now. At the time I came here, Jackson was a city of about 100,000 people. I became fairly well known within a reasonable time. Maybe within a year anyway. Now Jackson is over twice that size and the metropolitan area three or four times as much.

We are not together. We never have been in reality, even when we were smaller and well knit. Most certainly everything has been disbursed and there is not much pride in black business or black professions or anything. What the person wants now, especially the younger Negro, there are some young persons here and I hope you take a difference with me. I don't believe that anyone goes to anything black anymore because it is black. I think they go there without even thinking in terms of color. They think in terms of well this is convenient or this maybe what I want. I believe that is the idea with which our present situation is set up.

- Harrison: I wanted to ask you another question about who the other optometrists were who had treated black folks prior to your coming to Jackson.
- White: Oh, they had to be white. There were no blacks.
- Harrison: Do you know who some of them were?
- White: Yes. There is, let me see, I can't recall the name of some of them just now because they have retired and have been out of service here. There was one family, maybe Mr. Lockett can help me here since I can't recollect his name. There is a well known familyman that has his office downtown. You see, downtown was the main point.
- Harrison: Is it the Carringtons?
- White: No, he wasn't in practice at that ime. He came later.
- Lockett: Was there an Orkins?
- White: There was a Dr. Orkins and then there was one who had a shop built for optometry. He was one of the very few that had a shop built for optometry. He was located near Capitol in the upper region and he has since retired. That is where we were given part of our examination in his office. There was a brother, he had a brother in Optometry, in Kosciusko. His mother was an Optometrist as well.
- Dr. Carl Von Suta was one. Dr. Carl Von Suta's family should mean a lot to Jackson's history. They were quite famous in years gone by. They had one of the prominent leading jewelry stores on Capitol Street.
- He was also a historian when it comes to photography. Much of the early photography in Jackson has been done by Von Suta. His father or his uncle was suppose to have been the first. I saw this written in the library. The first white optometrist in the state was Von Suta. This son or nephew of his was practicing here when I came.
- Harrison: What kind of relationship if any did you have with these white optometrists?
- White: Now, they had to want a Negro optometrist or else they wouldn't have let me in because I had to pass the Board. So, there was, I think, a pretty good relationship there in the beginning. The Secretary to the Board was from my hometown, Hattiesburg. He was Dr. Goyer. He somewhat paved a way for me in taking the Board. There had been several Negroes who had taken it before, but I was the

White: first one to pass. Now after I took the Board and after I passed and I sat up myself in optometry, that was in 1951, you remember I said. Then in 1956 came the, or was it in 1957 that we had our Civil Rights Movement. When the Civil Rights Movement came, the attitude changed there between white and black. Remember that there wasn't but one black optometerist, just as it did in other fields. Whereas I had been welcomed to different meetings and conventions that were held previous to the Civil Rights Movement, during the Civil Rights Movement I wasn't welcome. I don't know whether I can say this on tape, some of the things that took place, but I will say this, I was told not to come to the Convention.

It wasn't because of the goodwill people whom we came in with, but as a different tide of people who came in just above that time who ruled optometry who were really running on a segregated ticket for some of the posts that were opened politically. So you see, there were a good number of factors working against me. Then by me being only one optometerist I could not speak out. I had no one to even help me in that line who felt the same pressures that I did. But after several years and much fight, I was able to come back and go to meetings and conventions again. That is a long story in itself. It would take too long I think to tell how it happened.

Harrison: Well, I am interested.

Luckett: We would like to know something about it.

White: Attorney Hall is here. He had something to do with it. You aren't dealing with people that are anyway dumb at all. They know what they are doing, when they tell you not to come. They wouldn't say it on paper, or write a letter to me that I couldn't come to the Convention. That would stand up. So they told me on the telephone not to come. Then they gave me a license--you had to go to the Convention in order to get your license. Yet they told you on the telephone not to come because we were required to have twenty hours of work. So, for a while I didn't know what was happening to me. I had said that I wouldn't be an Optometrist very long. They didn't want an open fight so what they did was to write me--give me a blank in which I would write down my credits. If I didn't put down my credits of twenty hours each year on that then I would have to be ill.

So in order to keep from having an open fight, they marked it themselves that I was ill. (Laughter) So they gave me my license by being ill and not being able to take this Board each year. I don't know how many years. Then one year they didn't mark it that way. Oh, this is something else.

White:

I said to myself that I wanted to get work just like they were getting it although they would excuse me. So, I would go out of the state. They didn't give you twenty hours in any of the conventions. They would maybe give, two; three or four hours. So, it meant that I would have to go around to a good number of conventions to get the number of hours that I needed. So, I went out and got a few hours, but I didn't attempt to get them all. They would mark it that I was ill anyway. But then one year it came back in which they didn't mark it that I was ill. It was too late for me to go out then to try to get the required number of hours. I had got about four or five, I think at the most six. I went back to my school and got some hours. It wasn't just any school work you could get, you had to get graduate work. So, that is what made it difficult. I didn't know what I would do then. That is when I got in touch with the lawyers.

I called up Attorney Young and Attorney Hall. They put me in touch with some other lawyers.

I don't like to get myself in trouble here, anyway, this blank that they had given me in previous years and had marked it that I was ill, the lawyers took a photographic copy of this in case that I didn't get my license. This would be used to show what had been done to me in previous years. They said they would send me a blank. When my lawyer called up the Board and they sent the blank with the check that I was to complete. I sent my money in. Then, about the 27th of December, I still hadn't received my license. If it expired by the first (1st) of January, then you were out of optometry. I was getting on edge again. I was thinking they just didn't intend for me to be it. I got in touch with the lawyer. They called up and they said that the post office in the town in which the secretary lived had been robbed. That was true. It came out in the paper that it was robbed. They believed that the letter that contained my license could have been in that batch, but they had really mailed it back to me. They said don't worry you will be allowed to practice. So they sent it off again. I sent it off again and I got my license back. I don't know whether it got back on the first or not, but I got it back in a short time afterwards.

Then it so happen that Mrs. Harvey, who lived next door above her undertaking establishment came over and was talking to me. She found out how much trouble I had been having. She said, "Dr. White, you don't mean to say you go through this every year in order to get your license. You don't know whether you are going to get them or not, whether out of charity they are going to sent it." She said, "I am going to sit right down and write these people a letter. You have got to go to these meetings. They

White: jus' have to let you go. I said that is alright Claire, I'll write them. So I wrote them a letter and somehow or another it must have touched them some kind of way, but they sent me a letter, no they didn't send me a letter. They couldn't send me a letter. They couldn't put in black and white anything they were doing. They called me long distance and told me they received my letter and they were going to discuss it with the whole covention of optometrists-- the group returning to the convention. So I said okay. But mean while, Jack Young and I think Attorney Hall, but anyway Jack Young was spear heading it for me.

So, they notified me when the convention was held here in Jackson, which was in the first part of January. They notified the Civil Rights lawyers and the President of the Board of Optometry, or the President of the State Board of Optometry.

They called me up and invited me to the meeting. My lawyer and Civil Rights lawyer called me up and I had several invitations to go to the meeting, to the school again. So, then I went. Several funny things happened when I got there. There were white optometrist who didn't know that they had a black optometrist. You see, I had been away so long and they had come in during that time. During one of the breaks in the session, some of them from the coast ran up to me and said, "Dr. White, we didn't know we had a black optometrist. We are glad to have you." They shook hands with me. I said, "but weren't you at the meeting yesterday?" "Didn't they discuss the fact they were going to allow this black optometrist to come in? They said, "No there wasn't any meeting yesterday. We didn't know anything about it." Then I knew that it as a lie. It wasn't a whole convention that kept me out, but a small knit group of people who were members of the Board. Some from the north part of Mississippi came. I asked them didn't they hear my name called and wasn't I discussed by the whole convention. They said no, there was no discussion. So that was the way I knew almost to pin point who it was that kept me out. It was primarily political because one of the members of the Board was running for an office as Congressman on the segregated ticket. I guess he couldn't say that they had a black optometrist and that isn't segregation and had him at the meeting.

Harrison: You were a member of this white optometrist convention from 1951 through about 1957, is that correct?

White: No, you can be an optometrist at that time, without going to the convention in the early beginning. They made up the laws that you had to have the hours after I got my license to practice optometry. I mentioned also that a Dr. Von Suta was--his family and history of Jackson

White: that we should know about. There were two Von Sutas. One was in a small town in northern Mississippi. He was instrumental in me getting to the convention in the first place because even now among the blacks they have their own black conferences in medicine, I understand. Of course, I couldn't because I was the only optometrist, just alone. So, he wanted me to come. He came to me and said, Dr. White, if you want to come you have to pay a fee, but we want you to come. I want you to come. I'm going to see that you can come. He had the nerve to sponsor me. He knew there was no one in the optometry to keep me out at that time because the atmosphere in which I came in was pretty good. It only got that way during the Civil Rights. This was maybe about 1952 that he came to me. But he had to make a way for me to go to the places that they held the conventions because remember at that time all the places were segregated. So he went to Roy Heildberg, who was the owner of Heidelberg Hotel in which the convention was held. He informed them that they had a black optometrist and could he come to the convention that they held. He said surely. He can do anything but eat at the same tables. He said he can eat there as far as I am concerned. I think he was quite clean and frank on that. He said, I am afraid that some of my guest would object. So if you all are having your own eating up there for just the optometrist, okay, but if you come down to the main restaurant I am afraid I am going to have to ask him not to come down there, to the convention. Most certainly he is quite welcome.

After Von Suta's assurance, I went to the convention. I am not sure of the year, but I think it was 1952. As I came in 1951, I wasn't a member of the convention as such. You had to pay dues to go to that. Does that answer your question? I wasn't put out of the convention. Remember, they used the term that I was ill when I didn't go.

Harrison: Is there anyway that you could pin point what year that was they began to use this term?

White: No, I can't say at this point.

Harrison: Do you have any of those letters or blanks around?

White: You know, I'm sorry I brought all this up. There are just two black optometrist now. In other fields there are groups of people. They can fight. I don't want to get into this alone.

- Harrison: I don't think anything will happen today (laughter).
- White: I don't think anything will happen today. (laughter) I don't want to think about it too much.
- Harrison: I have two other questions. Is there anyway you can pin point the year that you began?
- White: No, I can't do that either. I could if I went back and began to look up some of this material, this letter and the like.
- Harrison: My other question, I would like to have the name of the politician running on the segregated ticket.
- White: He is still very well known and active in optometry so I won't give you his name.
- Harrison: I understand that you feel that you would be revealing something, but not be incriminating in anyway because it would be a matter of public record, but would facilitate our finding out. Does anyone else have any questions they want to ask Dr. White about his experience as the first black optometrist either from 1951 up to the present or about the present. If you do, you want to develop a line of questions. I would like for you to come up and get it on tape, the recorder.
- Luckett: I would like to ask Dr. White if he considers his practice more active now than when it first began?
- White: It was more active when I first began. Remember when I first began I started from zero. You might not have been in here when I said I brought the first person I refracted in and gave them the examination free. It wasn't for advertisement. It was because I felt that I might not get an examination or refraction. I would have to leave here without ever examining anybody. So it started from zero and it progressed to the point where I did fairly well. With so many places like drugstores selling glasses and the like, that has just happened within the last couple of years, I don't think any optometrist is doing as well as he had once done. So there has been a decline not only with me, but the whole field or profession because of the commercial aspect of optometry.
- Luckett: Would you talk a little bit about your office and how it is decorated?
- White: Thank you. I didn't know we were going to get into this Civil Rights question which took up so much of the time.

White: I'm a literary student. Using literature as my background and finding that Farish Street wasn't decorated as well as Capitol during the Christmas season, I gave more attention to making my place, equal to any place along Capitol Street in having the spirit of Christmas. It wasn't for advertisement of Optometry. I had people in for a week from Christmas night until New Years. They came in and were shown Christmas scenes.. This was done for ten years, until I think I ran out of space as well as ideas. During say, half of that time, these open house features were quite popular and I think they helped a good bit in fostering the Christmas spirit here on Farish Street. They were really elaborate. I had a staff. It was endorsed by many of the churches who came in and the Art Department at Jackson State. I enjoyed it as well as the participants and people who came in to see these pagents, and my office. My office has a touch of my former background in it, though it's just a whole in the wall. I believe that the open house could have been thought of as something altogether different from Optometry. I think it reflects things of my life rather than Optometry unless you might say that seeing a vision is seeing.

Harrison: Okay, perhaps you can pursue that questions a bit more on Thursday night for those of us who are interested in coming back. On behalf of the class I want to thank you for answering the questions.

White: May I say this before closing? There was one thing, that was across the street, the Mississippi Baptist Seminary and that place had a great deal of bearing upon our street. It was a religious school. I kind of worked together with them, together in the spirit of giving my open house. You could see how rich Farish Street was in its heritage in having this school. I di'n't want that to pass without knowing how I worked in relation with this Baptist Seminary and what I gave.

Harrison: We would like to thank Dr. White for coming and sharing this information with us tonight. We would also like to thank the visitors.

White, David
O.H. 81.67

Index

- Advertisement 4
Armed Forces 1, 5
Art Department 15
Blacks 6
Black Conference of Medicine 12
Black Optometrist 5, 8-9, 11, 13
Capitol Street 7, 15
Carrington, The 6
Chaplain's Assistant 1
Chicago College of Optometry 5
Christmas 15
Civil Rights 11-12
Civil Rights Activities 2
Civil Rights Movement 8
Comprehensive Health Care 4
Congressman 12
Detroit 2
English/Literature 4-5
Farish Street 2, 15-16
Glasses 3
Glaucoma 4
Goyer, Dr. 7
Hall, Attorney Carsie 8-10
Harvey, Mrs. Clarie 10-11
Heidelberg Hotel 15
Jackson State 15
Johnson, Lindsey 4
Kosciusko 7
Lawyers 2
License Optometry 9-10
Lofton, Mr 3-4
Medical Doctor 4
Minister 1
Mississippi Baptist Seminary 15
Mississippi, Hattiesburg 7
Mississippi, Jackson 3-4, 7
Mississippi, North 12
Moore 3
Negro businesses 2
Negro optometrist 7-8
New Years Eve 15
Optometry Board 11
Optometrists 6-9, 13
Opometry Convention 8-10, 13
Orkins, Dr. 6
Pre Medicine 5

White, David
O. H. 81.67

Index

Refraction 14

Segregation 12-13

Segregated ticket 14

Undertaking establishment 10

Von Suta, Carl 7, 12-13

Whites 3

White patient 2

Young, Attorney Jack 10-11