

INTERVIEWEE: Mr. Samuel Cole
INTERVIEWER: Mary Moorehead
DATE: May 26, 1977
PLACE: Sumner Hill School
SUBJECT: Black Voter Participation in Clinton, Mississippi

Mary: What has been voter apathy in Madison Mississippi or Canton.

Samuel: It is more of Canton than Madison because in Madison County, there are various beats or voter districts. It so happens that I live in district three, in the County unit of Madison County and that does not give you the opportunity to vote in the city election. The small town of Richmond in Madison County, the odd thing about it is the ratio between blacks and whites is about two to one. This makes it rather difficult to perceive of the idea that we don't have more blacks in the law-making process in the Madison County. This has been one of the larger draw-backs that has existed for a number of years. However, if the well-being of that individual is depending on another person, you find that the attitude toward voting and to participating in the governmental policy is rather limited. First of all that individual is looking for a livelihood. The rate of unemployment of Negroes in Madison County is rather high unless they get out of Madison County into Hinds where the rate of employment is much higher. These are the kinds of things that we consider as the major draw-backs of people that live in Madison County.

I know through experience, having lived in Madison County all my life the voter process took place in the early 60's. It was one of the major factors that kept turning the tide. But prior to that time a number of blacks registered in Madison County. They began basically use the tactics that were used by persons who went to register in Madison County. One of the major draw-backs was the interpretation of the Constitution. You were required to interpret certain phases of the Constitution and the Chancery Clerk would say "take the envelope, take a question and write down the meaning or explanation of the question", that had been asked an individual. So this made person's reluctant to go through this experience. It was one I had to go through. The members of the Justice Department during that time came and asked why this had existed and if I felt that I had passed the interpretation of the Constitution. My statement to them was if anyone had passed the test I had. I felt that I had done well as the average citizen who had encountered this in Madison County. I felt that my interpretation of the Constitution, I felt should be accepted. However, if it reached the point of my going to court would I be willing to go to court. I certainly told them I would. These were the kinds of things that would be held against an individual and I didn't think it was fair. So that's just one experience of person's, of a personal experience an individual that had to go through to actually get registered in Madison County. Recently the attitude toward voting has changed to a degree.

Mary: Did you participate in any voter registration drives?

Samuel: Oh yes, you see if you go back to the early days of what we consider the freedom riders, that actually came to Miss. this was the forerunner of the 60's civil rights movement. We were person's who actually help to feed, to house, and to direct the freedom writers that actually came to Jackson. That was one of the typical experiences that I encountered. Hotels, résturants, motels in the city were either all negro or all black, or either all white or all negro whatever case you want to refer to , and a person who was in the resturant business that we felt were well established in Jackson. I called them and asked if we could bring person's to his res-
turant. They were white and this question to me if they were white or negro, this expression that was asked and I told them they were white and even this the individual was reluctant to actually accept the person's to come there. This is what I mean when I say the economic side matters to a large degree affected the voting issues so far as Madison County is concerned. Mainly because it was something that Negroes and whites were just , I want to say afraid in terms of fear but I would say afraid based on what would be the possible consequences if I did. That's the extent of the element of fear that I would inject because there were times when the whole econmic status was involved. We put economics before we did voting to a large degree. This is my idea, I'm not saying that it can be proven but this is just my opinion, the economic side of it before we put the real political or civil rights aspect into the issue. So far as participating in voter registration yes, we have. We fed them, directed them places to go. I recall one incident when the civil rights movement that involved the James Meredith incident was coming through Madison County, person's came by and what we could offer them and what we couldand what we felt was actually important, and if this helped those individuals then we were glad to do it.

Mary: Well, I don't know if you have kept up with things that have been going on in Clinton, eventhough you do work here but, what do you think are blacks feelings toward voting in Clinton?

Samuel: To the older person when the civil rights movemnet was taking its stronghold, you could get strong support from the older people of Clinton, because they had been denied not necessarily lawfully so but traditionally so. When the civil rights movement was actually taking a stronghold or stand from the older blacks in the Clinton area, because it was an opportunity for them to see the true meaning of actually going to the polls and the true benefit of them going to the polls. So I would think that support during that time was strong. They wanted to get out and do it but I look at the Clinton situation as I do throughout the nation when it comes to voting practices and and the voting process, especially among minorties, it appears

as though the driving force has lost some of its impact and for this reason I think the general theory applies in Clinton.

Now the outlying area of voting strength, look at Bolton and the election of Bennie Thompson as mayor. Bolton was considered as basically one of these isolated towns where basically the power struggle was controlled primarily by whites, the property owned basically by whites, but yet the results of the civil rights movement in the 60's people in the outlying area of Bolton saw the need to actually change these ideas. For that reason Thompson was elected. So we can say the Civil rights movement was the basis for some of the things that have occurred so far as negroes are concerned, not only Clinton but Bolton and many of these small towns even Canton and Madison at one time in Madison County to have a negro law enforcing agent no, that was out of the question. But, the civil rights movement has helped to change some of these attitudes.

Mary: Describe the kinds of services that blacks here receive as comparison to whites since the black population is something like 15% and the whites 85%?

Samuel Well, when it comes to services, I think that if you really would survey the town of Clinton proper would be of a visible thing that one could determine. We use this to give you an idea of what I'm talking about years ago you would go into the community, you could tell exactly when the negro property started. If it was a public road as compared to the whites property ending because of the conditions of the road here in some parts of the city of Clinton. You are still able to determine this. However, the growing parts of Clinton are in an eastward direction and as a result of that the population growth in the Clinton area proper is predominantly white although you do have some prominent negroes or blacks who are moving into the Clinton area, and its rapid expansion.

We had a situation of a realtor in Clinton that person invited me in to see what were some of my ideas as to how to go about, how to build up the Negro section that if we would sell them large acres or lots, do you think it would be beneficial and this is one of the things that started to spearhead some of the movement of building the Clinton area. Because of this process plus the fact the low income family housing moved in. We have two of those subdivisions in the general area and this shed light on the growth of the Clinton suburbs. The downtown part of Clinton has been a slow movement. So far as building is concerned, even for whites in the downtown area of Clinton residential area and development has been slow. They develop more in the suburbs of Clinton and move to the city limits of Clinton. Once the housing situation had developed, the city limits of Clinton extended and they were incorporated into the city limits of Clinton. So the services for these citizens, I believe to be basically ideal and the county area again, that goes back to your supervisors. He is the determining factor there.

Mary: Although the ratio of blacks in Clinton is extremely small, do you think this really has an affect on their participation in voting?

Samuel: I would think so to a degree, because we can look at some of the things that are involved when it comes to our participation generally base this on fact, person's who are in the immediate Clinton area, what was basically the original city limits that population is small and possibly will remain small. Instead of person's moving to the Clinton areas, they are moving to the suburbs. Therefore the participation so far as voting is concerned it will continue to remain small on the other hand, if the school systems of Clinton areas does not actually teach the importance of voting participation in the classroom to those person's who will be voting in a few years time, if they do not get the ball rolling, then these young person's in the Clinton area will soon be moving out . The population of minorities in the Clinton area will continue to decrease and the person's who are actually interested in voting and voting practices move out or die out, then it will automatically mean a decrease. I really don't see a large population of growth in the immediate Clinton area among blacks, surbubs yes, so this means then that the only thing could participate in would be thw county elections.

Mary: Does the school in any way prepare students for voter participation when they come of age?

Samuel: I can speak for the school we are in.

Mary: That is what I'm talking about.

Samuel: Yes.

Mary: In what way?

Samuel: Well, first of all it just so happened that I try to teach sociology, economics, and government. One of the things that I say to them for what it is worth, that if you don't register, and don't vote, don't complain if you don't get a fair share of the facilities and services you are entitled to don't criticize the person. Just don't say anything Now if you are concerned, lets learn the proper process of how to go about it. What is expected of a citizen, what is expected of you as an individual, then we say what of you as an individual black person or negro, who is considered to be white wabat is expected of you, who are considered a majority. We criticize the steps and actions of the person who is in office. Maybe you didn't have anything to do with his or her being in office, but certainly you have a responsibiocity if these people don't measure up by his not being elected once you comesof age, the only way to get rid of these elect-

ed officials is to vote them out the same way they were voted in unless, the person is charged with some type of felony or crime and is actually removed from office. Because of this is the only way we can get rid of them so, lets try to learn the value of voting and I try to relate to them a person who were involved in the real foundation of trying to move the voting procedures forward. You can refer it to issues of the Nineteenth Amendment so far as women are concerned. Let's bring it a little closer to home, when the eighteen year olds were to become eligible voters. Let's use this as an example, I tell them in a few days some of you will be eighteen, have you really gone to the city hall to really find out where it is located, and really asked your parents what steps you should take toward voting, or have your parents talked with you about voting? Then we try to approach it from this angle, with parents participating because we know a number of parents who were not registered. So, maybe as a result of that we will try to get the young adult who is just finishing high school to encourage parents to get out and register, because it is important. This is generally the approach that I have found and tried to take advantage and explain how affective it has been.

Mary: What has been the end product of your efforts?

Samuel: I really don't know because I have not done a follow up on them to see how many have actually registeted or voted. This may be a field I need to look into but, I have not. We do try to expose them to the process of voting.

Mary: What do you think is the real attitudes of parents in so far as encouraging their children to get out and register and to vote?

Samuel: I possibly would like to put them in two categories. As I said earlier the older parents who had not exercised that privilege rightfully theirs, in so many way denied them, if students presently enrolled, the students of these parents I think stand a fair chance of keeping these person's interested. On the other hand if he or she was a non-registered voter of a parent in the early 60's and 70's these young person's have not registered and voted, I think we are fighting a losing battle. It may not necessafily a losing battle but, we are fighting what is classified as a prolomged battle because someone has to go out and educate these young parents who have not taken the initiative to register and vote. This is why this kind of problem we are facing, that's pure speculation but that is the way I see it.

Mary: What do you mean when you say the general public is not educated to the point where they can see the value in voting?

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ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

INTERVIEWER AGREEMENT

I, Mary Madshead, in view of the historical and scholarly value of the information contained in the interview with Mr. Samuel Cole knowingly and voluntarily permit Jackson State University, Jackson the full use of this information, and hereby grant and assign to Jackson State University, Jackson all rights of every kind whatever pertaining to this information, whether or not such rights are now known, recognized or contemplated.

Mary Madshead
Interviewer (signature)

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