

THE FUNCTION OF THE LYNCH STREET C.M.E. CHURCH IN THE COMMUNITY

JACKSON

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ORAL _____

TRANSCRIPTION OF INTERVIEW

with

BERNARD M. THORNTON

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for _____

ORAL HISTORY 300

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by

Linda Overman

November 1, 1976

Date _____

JACKSON STATE UNIVERSITY

JACKSON, MISSISSIPPI

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

INTERVIEW AGREEMENT

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

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

I, Bernard Thornton, 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 know, recognized, or contemplated, to Jackson State University, Jackson, Mississippi.

Bernard Thornton
Interviewee (Signature)

October 28, 1976
Date

The purpose of this interview is to ascertain information concerning the function of the Lynch Street C.M.E. Church in the community. This interview is with Mr. Bernard M. Thornton, a member of that church since 1925 and a trustee since 1945.

A native of Natchez, Mississippi, Mr. Thornton has lived in Jackson for ^{fifty three} 53 of his ^{sixty eight} 68 years. He is married and the father of two children. He is in excellent health. He is retired from working for the A.F. of L. C.I.O.

This interview is being conducted on October 28, 1976, at 9:30 a.m. in Mr. Thornton's living room at 1713 Barrett Ave., Jackson. Mr. Thornton's wife and ^{their four year old twin grandsons} two small children are in the room during the interview. The interviewer is Linda Overman, a history major at Jackson State University, conducting the interview for Oral History 300.

Interviewer: Linda Overman
 Interviewee: Bernard M. Thornton
 Subject: The Function of the Lynch Street C.M.E. Church in the Community
 Date: October 28, 1976
 Time: 9:30 a.m.
 Place: 1713 Barrett Ave, Jackson, Ms.

[CHRISTIAN Methodist Episcopal]

O: Mr. Thornton, how long have you been a member of the C.M.E. Church?

T: Well, I joined that Church in 1925 under the pastor of Rev. Tom Sanders Jr.

O: Was that in Natchez?

T: No, here.

O: Oh, here after you moved to Jackson.

T: Right, I was A.M.E. till I moved to Jackson. Then when I moved to Jackson, I was out on this end (of town) ~~ose~~ I started going to Sunday School down there on Lynch Street so, I just joined in 1925.

O: I noticed on the cornerstone of the building and on the property deeds that you were a trustee in 1945, ^{and 49} 1965 and 1965. Was that continuous over that 20 year period?

T: Yes, continuously.

O: You joined the church in, you said 1925. ~~And~~ what kind of duties have you held with the church?

T: Well, trustee, steward, ~~and~~ teaching Sunday School, ~~And~~ secretary of the steward board.

O: How are trustees chosen for the church?

T: They are nominated by the pastor to the vote for the conference. They are confirmed by the board of conference. ~~See~~ the pastor makes ^{the} recommendations to the ^{voting board frame} ~~vote~~ for which the elder presides over, and he recommends seven, nine, or whatever they got to have. He recommends them to the board of conference to be confirmed for

T: (cont.) the conference ~~trustees~~ ^{save the} property.

O: What are a trustee's duties?

T: A trustee's duties are to look after the church property. Whatever the church owns, maybe, its got typewriters, or chairs, or pews, a piano, organist, ^{cut} the utilities, ^{stuff} like that. Trustees is custodians ^{over} All or anything in the church.

O: Since your name was on the deed, I noticed, when there was a name change ~~at the time I noticed it~~, Then you do legal duties for the property?

T: Right, if it come necessary.

O: What type of activities did the C.M.E. Church provide for its members?

T: Well, ~~we don't have~~ ^{say}, ~~well we have~~, what would you consider activities? such as Sunday School. . .

O: Well, I know that they had choir and Sunday School . . .

T: We had Sunday School, we had choir, we had C.Y.F. for the young people. ~~we had choir, C.Y.F., Sunday school.~~

O: Did they have any type of ladies organizations?

T: Well, they had missionary society and then you have the laymen council ^{and} all the laymen ~~meet there~~ once every month and we study the Discipline (guidelines for the C.M.E. Church) or whatever literature. Highpoints are pertaining to the C.M.E. church.

O: The book of what? I didn't understand what you said.

T: The book of Discipline.

O: Oh.

Mr. Thornton got up out of his chair and went across the room to get a book titled, Discipline, Christian Methodist Episcopal Church and brought it back to show it to me.

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T: This is the book of Discipline.

O: Oh, I see.

T: This is what we ^[use to] govern our church, rules and regulations and bylaws is in here. This is what regulates our church. Then we have the stewardess board ^{-- MANY} how ^{boards} ~~did~~ I name? We have the Sunday School, the choir, the C.Y.F., the missionary ~~society~~, the laymen council. That's the only type of activity we had at the church.

O: I met Mrs. Thornton. Do you two have any children?

T: Two. Helen which we talked about ^(in pre-interview) and ^{we've got} a son. He's in Chicago.

O: Was your entire family active in the church?

T: Right, ^{all} of us.

O: Did you feel ~~like~~ ^{the} church that ~~the church~~ helped draw your family together ?

T: Well, I would say keep us together. I mean that we all joined ,of course, my wife and I and then ^{when} the kids got up large enough they joined with us and ~~so~~ we all stayed in the church . My boy stayed in there till after he left and went to Chicago. Of course, he joined the C.M.E. Church up there. Just my wife, and myself, and my daughter , we still in this Lynch Street one ^(the new church).

O: Did you ~~feel~~ find that in your family you made very many friendships at the church or were most of your friends from other places?

T: The church ~~church~~ ~~church~~ made a lot of friends. Of course, I've got a lot of friends other places but I've considered my closest friends in the church. That's why I'm on the board and why I keep being ^{in the} church.

O: Did you patronize businesses of people in the church?

T: Yes, I patronized the businesses of my friends ~~and~~ ^{and if} they got a man in a filling station or grocery store or what have you. I made it a practice ~~to you know~~ to patronize them.

O: How important do you feel that the C.M.E. Church has been in the surrounding community?

T: Well, I feel like it's been a lot of help to the community. A lot of people have joined since that time ^[1925]. I think we've got about 400 and some members of the church. When I joined the church down there I think we had about 60 or 70. Since that time it has increased tremendously.

O: ^{did many students} ~~Do you feel like there was ever much interaction between the~~ students from the university ^{come} ~~coming~~ to the church?

T: ~~Well,~~ there was a time when we was down here (old church on East Lynch) they came all the time ^{but}, since we been down on this end now (new church on Lynch) just far ^{between} and fewer ~~come~~. They don't come nothing like nearly every Sunday. Some of them come from the college ~~come~~ down to the services and they'd have a matron with them. Every once in a while ^{a few} ~~they~~ come down there now (to the new church).

O: Of course, the older church was closer to the university.

T: It was closer and they just walked right down there but, now since we're down here (new location) at the new church it's farther.

O: It's quite a ways.

T: Quite a ways and too many activities at the college.

O: Do you feel like the church helped in any way to draw the neighborhood together?

T: I think it did. I'm not quite sure what they did but they done some differant things.

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O: What do you feel has been the function of the church in the community?

T: Well, as far as I'm concerned I think it has done a tremendous job toward the functioning of the community. Cause every once in awhile we make a survey of the area ^{we} go into people's homes and talk with them and find out about their christianity or if they are a member of any church. Nine times out of ten we gain a few members from that source. But there's so many churches in this area here that we don't get too many people. Right around here in this area we got ^{how} many churches ^{we} got quite a few. Got the Catholic church right down there (Christ the King on Lynch street). One, two, got about eight or ten churches right here in this area. So, what has been more help to us since ~~you know~~ since they integrated and ^{all} more of these white people in that area (between Lynch St. and Robinson Rd.) moved out and a lot of black folks moved over in that area. That's been a lot of help to us since we been down there (new location). But when we was in the old church ~~over in~~ that area over there ~~now~~ wasn't nothing but whites. ^{but} they just about all moved out now and that area's full of black people and we been able to get some of them in church.

O: That gives you a bigger area to draw from.

T: That's right got a bigger ~~area~~ area to draw from.

O: As a member of the church did you ever get involved in political activities or any social problems?

T: NO, ~~well~~ I never did get involved in no political activities, ^{frankly} I didn't think I had brains enough (laughs and wife laughs too)

O: Probably as many as anybody else (laughing)

T: To tell you the truth, I didn't think I had brains enough. I always thought they was some things left to certain people and I didn't feel like I'd be much help to them in political activities.

O: What about social things? I know Rev. Brown mentioned to me things about community chest and they were involved in things of that type in the church.

T: ^{about all churches are} Oh, I ~~always~~ involved in that. Now we always see to it that a donation is sent community chest, red cross, and of course, all these organizations the church sent money, ^t Cause we'd get a letter or something from these organizations maybe, from the heart fund or one like that and we used to send a donation.

O: How did you feel about all the ~~clubs~~ clubs being so close to the church there on Lynch Street? The bars? and . . .

T: Where down here?

O: Down at the old church.

T: Well, I couldn't feel too bad about it cause see ~~when we moved there~~ when the church moved down there (1909) all those bars and things were't ~~there then~~. In fact, they didn't have beer and stuff way back ^{at that end} ~~there then (when he joined church in the 20's)~~. Finally, and then the city hadn't passed the type of ordinances they got now about these establishments being so close to the church. They didn't have that then way back ^{That ended} ~~that~~ course we didn't move away from down there on account of we were talking to ~~the~~ city. The city told us that they would be glad if the church would go back up there (old location) ^{where it was before} ~~you know but what for~~ we went down there (new locatia) but, we trustees got together and got to looking at this thing and ~~and~~ decided we didn't have ~~no~~ parking space down there and the property right back of the church we ~~couldn't~~ buy that and the ~~property~~ on this side of the church (west) we couldn't buy that so, then we decided.

T: (cont.) to move. So, that's why we're down there (new location) where we is now.

O: Did any of the members of the church ever try to do anything about you know maybe try to get some zoning or anything about getting rid of the clubs or maybe reduce ^{ing} the number of them?

T: No, we didn't do nothing about that. We'd go over like that place right in front ~~of~~ of us there sometimes on a Sunday. They'd try to play music right loud or something like that and we'd go over and talk to the ~~owner~~ owner and they was real nice. They wouldn't play it till after services.

O: It didn't interfere then very much?

T: No, it didn't interfere. It didn't interfere at all because we'd go over and talk with the owner and he'd assure us that it wouldn't happen anymore so we didn't have any problems .

O: I want to ask ^{you} about the cornerstone. I know that the building was remodeled in 1945 ^o was that mostly ^y remodeling the inside, ~~or~~ the outside, or to increase the size of the building? ~~or what did they do?~~

T: The outside. You know, at that 1945 Lynch Street was dirt. Didn't ^{have} this what you see out there now and in the front facing the street that was about 18 or 20 steps you had to ^{come} get up to ^{get} ^{to} come up in the vestibule of the church. So then, the city decided that ~~the~~ street had to be widened out because it was coming up to the college (Jackson State). So then that's why we had ~~redone it~~ ^{redone it} over. Not the whole thing, but we had to move the steps from in the front you know, from where you see that ^{corner stone} ~~on~~ ¹ on each side and then we had to put these steps on each side of the church. ¹ and that's why that was done in 1945. That's the way it is now. But at that time, you didn't know that was a gravel street?

O: No I didn't.

T: That ^{GRAVEL} street wasn't wide as nothing. And you didn't know that was a gravel street?

O: No, I didn't know that. Are there any plans right now to do anything with that building or the property?

T: Down there? We have been in the process now of trying to get some bids on it. I'm doing that. I've had several people go down there and ^{TAKE A} look at it last week but, I haven't got anyone yet. Jackson Wrecking Company is the only one that give me a bid ^{on it}. They bid ^{it} so high till I don't know if we can ^{have it done} I don't mind telling you what it was, \$8000.00. And we feel like that's

And nobody else has sent me any bid. I told them I wanted ~~them~~ by the 3rd of next month (November, 1976) which is when the C.M.E. trustee board is trying to have another meeting because the city wants it cleared up ~~by in as much as they I guess you call that a sort of what-~~ ^{they want us to} ~~ever you call it.~~ In as much as they done I guess ~~they once they get~~ that property done.

O: Do you know anything about the cemetery across the street (from the old church)?

T: Now that's a thing I don't know too much about that cemetery over there. They used to do a right smart a burying in there years ago but finally I don't know whether it got filled up or everybody left or what happened. But anyway they won't keep it clean or nothing. That's another problem we've been having now trying to keep the thing clean. Somehow or another the black people that had families and things ^{out} in there . . . ^{So that's why its in the shape it's in now.}

O: When was the old building vacated? When did you move down to the new site?

T: We've been down there now since about 3 years.

One of the two small children (~~a grandchild and a neighbor's child~~) that were in the room, during the interview, yelled.

O: Someone was telling me that in their church there is some segregation ~~in church~~ among the sexes, with men sitting on one side and women on the other side. Was there any of that in your church?

T: We don't have that, no ma'm. They sit anywhere they want to.

O: ^{Did} ~~Do~~ men have a more active role in the church during services?

T: Well, I would say it was about even.

O: I want to thank you, I believe I have everything I need. Thank you very much for your interview.

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