Civil Rights History Project
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Interviewee:	Julia Matilda Burns
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Interviewer:	John Dittmer
Videographer:	John Bishop
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[Throughout the interview, there is quite a bit of static and sound quality is uneven, almost as though the recording is voice-activated.]

John Bishop: We're rolling.

John Dittmer: Today is Wednesday, March thirteenth, 2013. My name is John Dittmer, and I am here in Tchula, Mississippi, with videographer John Bishop to interview Mrs. Julia Matilda Burns, a leading civil rights activist in the Holmes County Movement. This interview will become part of the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, D.C. Mrs. Burns, we are delighted to be here today and we thank you for taking the time to talk with us.

Julia Matilda Burns: Oh, well, thank you very much. I hope I can be of some service to you all. [Laughs]

JD: Oh, you will, I'm sure. We would like to start by talking about where you were born and raised and your family.

JB: I was born and raised in Greenwood, Mississippi. In the family were one brother and three sisters, mother Margaret Griffin, father Trevania Griffin. By the age of three, I moved to—we moved to Humphreys County.

JD: Why did you do that?

JB: Well, at that time, in the early '40s, the government was purchasing land to give people their own home. So, my father took advantage of that situation, because we were living in the city of Greenwood on the street, so they say, no place to play or nothing like that. So, he decided that we'd all go to the country. So, we moved to Humphreys County, and under that setup, we bought a government plot.

JD: The Farm Security Administration.

JB: Right, Farm and Home—Farm Security, I guess. Anyway, we got, I think it was a 123 acres of land to farm, and etcetera, and that gave us a stepping stone to progress.

JD: Um-hmm.

JB: Um-hmm.

JD: So, what did you farm? Did you plant cotton?

JB: We had cotton, corn, cane, truck patch, and we had chicken, hogs, cows, guineas, ducks, and everything you could name.

JD: A full farm, wow!

JB: Full forest, right. Had all little—never-never-land, I guess you could call it. [Laughs]

JD: Yeah. Well, and how large was your family?

JB: One boy and three girls, Mother and Father.

JD: Um-hmm, and where were you on that chain?

JB: I'm the second one on the list.

JD: Second one on the list, okay.

JB: I'm the second child. My brother is older than I. Now, he's in Buffalo now, but I have a sister that still owns a home place in [Silver City].

JD: Oh, really?

JB: And I have a sister in Chicago, and one in Oak Park, Michigan.

JD: Uh-huh.

JB: And we're the only two here in Mississippi. Everybody else left.

JD: So, they—a lot of migration out of the state?

JB: Right. They did. They left. My brother left earlier than anyone, because he wanted to help me go to college. I finished high school, and he decided that he was going to help me go to college. My father thought it was best for me to stay and get an education. So, he went to Michigan—no, went to New York and got a job with General Motors. And that's how I got my education: He would work and send money back home to help me get an education.

JD: I see. Growing up on the farm, did you—did all the kids pitch in? Did you?

JB: Everybody had to pitch in. Unfortunately, my mother passed when I was only 13 years old. So, I had to shift positions early in life and become the head of the household as a female. And my sisters and brother continued to work on the farm. But I was mostly part-farmer and part-housekeeper, helping all the others get together.

JD: I see. So, you had to grow up in a hurry.

JB: I grew up overnight, really overnight.

JD: Yeah.

JB: Um-hmm.

JD: So, what about your schooling? You had moved out of Greenwood before you were in the first grade.

JB: Right, moved out of Greenwood by the age of four, if I can remember correctly. But my brother was six, and we moved into the Humphreys County area near a school. And my brother was the kind of person that they would always pick on. So, my mother was a teacher, so to keep her from being in the middle of a children's fight, I went to school, too. So, I was the one who was fighting for my brother. He would start the fight, but he couldn't do nothing with them. [Laughs] So, I had to fight the big boys off of him! [Laughs]

JD: Oh, wow!

JB: So, that made me get a start in school early, so I started in school when I was really about four and a half years old.

JD: Really?

JB: Or maybe five. And then, at home with my mother, you know, naturally she was going to teach us how to read and write.

JD: Yeah.

JB: I was able to do my reading and writing, and I got the little [04:36], the little paperback book, finally another [04:40] a little bit harder, and finally a hardback book in one year.

JD: Wow.

JB: And so many words, in that time, it was considered three grades. So, that's the way I moved on up and eventually caught up with my brother. He was ahead of me, two years ahead of

me, but I eventually caught up with him, and we went on through high school, grammar school and high school together.

JD: And he was how much older? [05:00]

JB: Two years older than I.

JD: So, you skipped two years then?

JB: I skipped—made two years in one.

JD: Tell us about the school.

JB: During that time, it was—it wasn't a plantation school, but it was an old—it wasn't an old building, either, but it was old-timey, because they had a potbelly stove to heat. Children had to get wood to start the fire and keep warm and everything. At that time, there was two teachers, yeah, two teachers in the whole big room from one through eight.

JD: Wow.

JB: So—

JD: So, how did that operate during the day?

JB: During that time, it was marvelous! Because the two teachers were—I guess you would call it now a teacher and a principal, because the eighth grade person was the overseer. It went well.

JD: And you learned from the classes ahead of you, too, didn't you?

JB: Yes, I did, because it was a big open setting. [Laughs]

JD: I was in a situation with two classes that—[laughs] the upper grade was always more interesting than mine.

JB: Yeah, everybody is in the classroom, you know, so if you're paying attention, you can know what the other people are doing.

JD: There were some advantages to one-room schools.

JB: It was, it was. Anyway, we made it well through that situation. And after, oh, I guess, probably three years, they consolidated the schools. And the children that were going to the lower part of Humphreys County, as compared to us in the center part of Humphreys County, came together, and they named the school Humphreys—no, they named that school [06:32] and Hodge. The Hodges were down on the lower end of the county, and the [06:39] was in the middle of the county, so we went to—the school then became [06:45] and Hodge. We stayed there until after graduation, I guess, seventh grade. Then, they built a new school and they called it the [06:52] and Hodge School, too, and that school went until eighth grade. After eighth grade, we went to Louise, to Humphreys—still in Humphreys County—Humphreys County Training School in Louise, Mississippi.

JD: Now, when did you enter—what year did you enter the Louise school?

JB: Must have been in '50—'50 or '51.

JD: Um-hmm.

JB: Um-hmm, and it was ninth grade. Stayed there until '54. After '54, finishing high school, I went to Mississippi Valley State University.

JD: Okay, I want to talk about that a little later.

JB: Okay.

JD: '54 was also the year of the *Brown* decision.

JB: Yes.

JD: Were you aware of that? And did it mean anything?

JB: Not at that time.

JD: Yeah.

JB: Not at that time, you know. It probably was in the news, but you know how youth are at that time.

JD: Yeah, um-hmm.

JB: News is news, and if it doesn't affect anyone you know, it doesn't register with you. But later on in life, I realized what was going on with *Brown versus Board of Education.*

JD: Yeah. And, of course, nothing happened in Mississippi anyway for a while.

JB: No, no, no, no. That was in Kansas City, so that bypassed us quite a bit.

JD: One of the things the state of Mississippi tried to do, anticipating *Brown,* was to beef up the black schools so that they could say we're separate but we're equal. Did you see any of that, anything coming into your school, like new buildings or materials or anything?

JB: None whatsoever. None whatsoever.

JD: You didn't benefit from that?

JB: Not at all. Not at all. Not even textbooks.

JD: Yeah. What about textbooks?

JB: Textbooks—now, in my ninth grade year at Humphreys County Training School, I saw new textbooks, because they introduced a class that was called "Everyday Science," and there were no "Everyday Science" before then. So, once they introduced that "Everyday Science" in the Humphreys County School District, that afforded us to have new books. First time seeing a new book was in my ninth grade year.

JD: Wow. And the rest were passed down from white schools?

JB: Passed down from the high school, um-hmm.

JD: Yeah. The—so you—I lost my train of thought here. But you were—well, let me just go to this, because it was a time—you're in the 1950s, and there is racial violence, and I'm asking everybody about the Emmett Till case and what you remember about it.

JB: Recalling the Emmett Till case—I'm not good at the date, now.

JD: 1955.

JB: '55?

JD: Um-hmm.

JB: '55, I was finishing high school that year. We used to get what's called a *Jet* magazine. It's still in publication. And that's where I saw and was able to read the story on the Emmett Till situation.

JD: Did you get it at the high school?

JB: No, no, it came to my home.

JD: Yeah, because I didn't think they'd allow it in high school. [Laughter]

JB: No, we got it at home. My mother and father were the kind of people [10:00] who thought we needed to keep up with newspapers and stuff like that, and we did get them. And that was a magazine that we all raced to read, because we could read about what other black people were doing. That's when I remember what was going on with him, or that's how I recall.

JD: You saw the picture of Emmett Till?

JB: I saw the picture of the [shudders] the body and all, which was terrible. I just couldn't believe it, but, you know, it was true.

JD: Do you remember any kind of discussion in the family or with your friends about this, because he was, you know, not much—well, a little bit younger than you?

JB: Well, my brother—my father would always tell him, "Be careful. Don't bother them white girls. Don't play with the white girls," even though there were none in our community. Boys go everywhere, so they say, and he had access to the family vehicle, so he was moving around. And my daddy would always tell him not to whistle at them, not to play with them, you know, just ignore them. But now, believe it or not, there were some black boys in the Belzoni situation—this is Belzoni city, now—they had white girlfriends!

JD: Oh, really?

JB: Um-hmm, at that time. And nothing was done about it. People would see them. They were walking together or riding together, and etcetera. Nobody paid any attention to it. But no one wanted to be following in the footsteps of Emmett Till.

JD: Yeah, yeah. The trial was held, and the people were set free, and things sort of took off from there in terms of—I was telling Ms. Head that a number of civil rights activists, you know, sort of point to the Emmett Till case as a turning point in their lives, that from that point on, they realized something had to be done, because that could have been them.

JB: Yes, that was a serious time in our lives, uh-huh. When you look back at—no one wants to repeat that situation.

JD: Yeah.

JB: Um-hmm, and they had the funeral set up and everything and showed the body. And that picture came through in the *Jet* magazine, and it was just a horrible sight to see.

JD: Yeah, yeah. I want to talk about another institution in your community, the church. Was that important to you?

JB: Extremely important to us.

JD: Talk about it.

JB: Believe it or not, we grew up between a Baptist church and a Methodist church.

JD: Oh?

JB: There was a Sanctified church further down. So, *every* Sunday morning, we had to be in one, the Baptist or the Methodist.

JD: Oh, you had a choice, huh? [Laughs]

JB: [Laughs] I don't know whether we had a choice; we just had to *go*!

JD: [Laughing] I see. You couldn't choose to stay home.

JB: No, we just had to go. But the Baptist church was closer to us than the Methodist church. We could actually walk to the Baptist church, even though we were Methodists by faith. And we would go every Sunday morning. Our pastoring day was the fourth Sunday in the month. The fourth Sunday in the month, Daddy would let us use the truck to go to our church. But anyway, we stayed with the Methodist church, but we just attended the Baptist church. If something special was going on in the Sanctified church, we would call it, we would ride to see that. But some of our friends would have to pick us up, because it was further down the road than our church. So, religiously, we had to be involved.

JD: Um-hmm, you were a family of faith.

JB: Right. We were always in one church or the other, every Sunday. Um-hmm. And we're still, or at least I'm still Methodist! [Laughs]

JD: Yeah. So, you *did* make your choice! [Laughs]

JB: Yes, I made my choice, uh-huh.

JD: What were the major influences on you when you were growing up?

JB: My major influence that I can recall was my tenth grade English teacher. Very smart lady, very smart, and she just had a liking for people who wanted to do something. And I guess

she could see in me what I could not see in myself, and she suggested to me that I should go to college and major in English. And that's what I did. And I think about her continuously now, you know, what an impact that was on my life, you know. You know, tenth grade children, they don't think about their future. You know, they're just having a good time.

And by them—you know, during that time—let me back up. During that time, teachers took an interest in children's wellbeing and their future. All the way through high school, there was some teacher telling you what you ought to do, or what you should do. And those teachers even visited the families in the community and told the parents, "Your child did this, your child did that." And believe it or not, you know, if it's good the parent will work with it. If not, the parent would try to correct it.

So, she told me that I should become an English teacher, and I worked toward that end. And I went home and I told my daddy, I said, "Daddy, Miss [14:54]—" Miss [14:55], I forgot her first name— "said I need to go to school to become an English teacher." He said, "You want to teach English?" [15:00] I said, "She said I was to be pretty good at it, and that's what I decided to do." And he said, "Okay, I'll do what I can to help you."

I finished school that year, my brother went off to work, and my father and I went through the educational process. And we were about three miles from the bus stop. I rode the bus to college. We didn't have enough money to stay on campus, so I rode the bus.

JD: So, you were the only one of your siblings to go to college then?

JB: At that time.

JD: At that time?

JB: At that time, yes. Later on, my sister next to me went on, but she had gone to Chicago. She went to—oh, Malcolm X? Was there a Malcolm X College?

JD: Yeah.

JB: Okay. She went there.

JD: As a former tenth grade English teacher, I'm interested in what your class was like. What books did you read? Did you have access to libraries, to textbooks?

JB: We had access to library books, and we could check them out and take them home with us. But not like now, you know, the children cannot take them away from the school. They have to study them in the school. We could take them home and keep them for a week or so, whatever you were doing, you could return it and, you know, use the book to your advantage.

JD: What do you remember reading?

JB: [Laughs] Oh, my goodness, way back then! I was crazy about Alfred Lord Tennyson.

JD: Oh, yes!

JB: He was a good poet and I would just sit and read, read for days, some of his poems. And that inspired me, too, to—there was another one—oh, I can't think of him. Edgar Allan Poe was one, and—oh, my goodness, there was another one. But I just liked to read them because they were in tune to nature. I like nature and the activities that's there.

JD: Do you remember any black writers that you read? I mean, Richard Wright, obviously.

JB: Oh, yes! But I read his book *Soul On Ice*, and I got mad! [Laughs] That *Soul On Ice* was so fiery. It was so violent.

JD: Well, that's Eldridge Cleaver.

JB: Eldridge Cleaver, right, right. That's right, Eldridge Cleaver.

JD: No, Wright wrote *Black Boy*, about growing up in Mississippi.

JB: *Black Boy*. Yeah. I didn't get a chance to—I didn't like that too well. I guess it reminded me so much of what I had heard about or lived with, you know.

JD: Um-hmm. So, talk about—now, Mississippi Valley, as I recall, was a new school.

JB: Mississippi Valley was built in 1950. I think that's when they had the first class. And I think they had two buildings or three buildings. Wasn't many buildings there, but they had an administration building and a classroom building and something else at that time. I went to school there through the, I guess you call it, classroom building. Everything was in one building. All of the majors operated from one building. We didn't have access to the whole, you know, buildings like they have now. So, everything took place in one building.

JD: How many students were there?

JB: Oh, I don't recall. It wasn't that many, because the class that graduated in '51 or '52 had 16—I think it was 16 or 32, between the two, 16 or 32 students, and that was it. Small student body at that time, but it has grown quite a bit now.

JD: Oh, yeah.

JB: Different majors.

JD: Yeah. How many majors were there at the beginning? It must have started out small.

JB: Education. I think it was predominantly education. It was designed to give people a chance to major in education. President—Dr. White, James Herbert White, came with the idea that they needed teachers in the Delta. He came out of Tennessee. I've forgotten what part now. He came out of Tennessee, and that was his goal: to create opportunities for teachers to be developed in the Delta area.

JD: Um-hmm. And so, when did you graduate?

JB: I graduated in '55—'59, '59, '59!

JD: '59. Did you do student teaching as part of this?

JB: Yeah, we had to do student teaching. That was a requirement at the time. You know, we had to do student teaching, and they would—the student teacher would come out and observe you, and all like that.

JD: Where did you do your student teaching?

JB: I did mine in Belzoni where I grew up in Humphreys County. It was Belzoni McNair High School at the time, McNair High School in Belzoni.

JD: What was the high school like? That's something that we don't hear very much about, the school life in the 1950s at the end of the segregated era.

JB: School life for me, I guess, it took a turn for exploring, just—it was a time when I was really trying to find out what is going on and why it's going on, along with trying to get a decent education.

JD: When you were student teaching, what were your students—? [20:00] Did they have aspirations to go to college, or what were they—?

JB: I had some very good students as a student teacher, because I don't know whether you've heard of Clara Reed in Belzoni?

JD: Yeah, yeah.

JB: That was one of my students. But then, I had some on the flip side, altogether different from her, Clara Reed and Carrie Harris and several more who turned out to be very productive people.

JD: Well, you remember them.

JB: I remember them, I see them, I ask about them! [Laughs]

JD: Yeah, yeah.

JB: So, some of them are doing well, and some of them are not, you know. Aspirations for them, you know, it was kind of so-so, so they say.

JD: And then, you got your first teaching job.

JB: I got my first teaching job there, but I wasn't married at the time. After being there for a while, I got married in my second year there. Then I went to Chicago.

JD: Oh, well, tell us about Chicago.

JB: I didn't do anything in Chicago. Chicago was not the place for me. That's why I'm here now.

JD: I thought Mississippi was in Chicago. [Laughter]

JB: Yeah, Mississippi *went* to Chicago. [Laughter] Yeah, but the winter I was there was so cold. It must have been in '50—no, '60, '61, '60 or '61—'59 and '60. It was so cold in Chicago I didn't even open the front door. My husband would come through the back door to keep the cold air from coming through the front door. So, I stayed there that year and I said—

JD: What were you—your husband was working there?

JB: He was working there, um-hmm. He was working at a place called Wiebolt, you know, Wiebolt in Chicago, a big department store. He was a sales person down there. But I just couldn't take that cold weather. So, I stayed in and I promised myself when the weather changed, I'm going home. I told him I was going home, but he said, "No, I got to work, I got to work." So, I kept fussing about him going home and going home, and we finally came home. We came home, and he started farming. And that's how we got back here, me being—

JD: Did you go back to your family farm?

JB: No, he had a farm here.

JD: He had a farm?

JB: He had a farm. His family had a farm just like my family had a farm, the same process, through the Farm and Home Administration.

JD: So, you were independent, then, of white people, in terms—economically?

JB: Well, kind of—

JD: You were not sharecroppers?

JB: No, we didn't sharecrop. But we had to go to the Farm and Home Administration for loans, and that created a problem, you know. But we made it pretty good. I remember one year my father made one bale of cotton. One bale of cotton! And everybody laughed at him, and some felt sorry for him, as to how he was going to take care of family with one bale of cotton. But we had cows, hogs, and everything else, you know. We only had to buy sugar and flour, because there was a man with a gristmill in the community, ground the corn up for meal and grits. So, we made it! And with the orchard and all of that, we had—we worked, but we had a decent living. Didn't have any money, though!

JD: Did you have much contact with whites growing up?

JB: No. We would see them passing by. But, now, there were two merchants in the area—there was a merchant in Belzoni and there was a merchant in Carter. My father would trust us to go there to get what we needed. For example, if we needed meat or something like that, or sugar, he made provisions for us to go there and get what we needed, like that.

JD: I've heard Belzoni was a pretty tough town.

JB: It was, it was.

JD: Talk about it.

JB: Belzoni now is—I don't think it's bad now.

JD: Um-hmm, but back at the time.

JB: Yeah, back at the time, it was—people were really afraid to go to Belzoni.

JD: Yeah.

JB: They were leery of going. I don't know whether they were afraid or not. They were leery of going to Belzoni. And once you got there, you picked up your items and hurried out of Belzoni. There were a family of boys down below us, the Buckston boys. They had to go to town every Saturday night, so they say. And it was always a problem with those boys, because their father had to go back there Sunday morning and get them out of jail. But we didn't experience that. We knew where to stay: at home.

JD: I mention this because, among civil rights workers, Belzoni was known as a really tough town. And when they were having the debate about bringing in the Freedom Summer volunteers, they said, "Well, we're going to bring whites down to sort of cause trouble." And one Movement person said, "Well, let's bring a thousand of them and put them all in Belzoni." [Laughter]

JB: Belzoni could not have held a thousand. [Laughter]

JD: And then, after you came back from Chicago, why, what did you do?

JB: After I came from Chicago, there was a principal by the name of S. V. Marshall. Marshall High School? He was the principal at the time, and I came back and told him that I wanted a job, and I was hired that same fall. At that time, school was starting in September. We got back from Chicago in August, [25:00] and I told him that I wanted to work, and he hired me for the September session.

JD: Did you have divided sessions then?

JB: No, it was all the same.

JD: Um-hmm, you were back on the nine-month schedule?

JB: Right, nine months. And I guess it was—no, it wasn't nine months. Eight months!

JD: Eight months.

JB: Eight-month schedule, um-hmm.

JD: And where were you teaching then?

JB: At Marshall High School right up there on the hill, that you said you passed.

JD: Oh, I see! You were here.

JB: Right, I was here.

JD: Okay, we got you in Tchula now. [Laughs]

JB: I'm in Tchula now. [Laughs]

JD: Okay, you moved here with your family and—

JB: I had one child at that time. That's my oldest son, Reginald.

JD: And your husband was farming?

JB: He was farming. When he came back, at that time, the Movement was just about to get started, and several people were working around getting the Movement started. So, he finally got a job teaching in the Civil Rights Movement, I believe it was SNCC at the time.

JD: Yeah.

JB: S-N-C-C.

JD: Yeah, SNCC.

JB: SNCC, okay. So, he went there and he worked with them, and finally got a start with Head Start, CDGM. Remember that?

JD: Oh, yeah. We're going to get there. [Laughs]

JB: [Laughs] Okay. So, what I'm saying, he was farming and at the same time working with the people to get the Movement going.

JD: So—

JB: He was much more involved with the Movement than I was.

JD: Yeah.

JB: Um-hmm.

JD: As a teacher, why, you were sort of limited in some ways, weren't you?

JB: Very much so.

JD: Talk about that.

JB: Very much so, because there was a man by the name of John Ball, I believe it was John.

JD: Yeah, um-hmm.

JB: Came out of Greenwood. And by my husband being actively involved with the Civil Rights Movement, I guess he thought I would be, too.

JD: Yeah.

JB: And he did. He came by the school and was telling me what was going on, and I didn't know any better. I'm standing up there in the hallway just talking to him about what I was going to do and everything. And the principal came by, and he didn't say anything, just passed by. But, anyway, when John Ball left, he told me I was going to eventually lose my job if I didn't let that alone.

JD: Okay. That's—I'm glad—I'm not glad to hear that, but that's evidence that this thing did happen.

JB: Yeah, he told me if I didn't let—no, if I didn't let them Freedom Workers alone, I was going to lose my job. And naturally, I didn't go *boldly* with it, but they would come by the house in the afternoon or at night or Saturday afternoon or Saturday night. They didn't park in

the driveway like people had been parking. So, my house had a driveway around the back. So, they would come and park their cars behind the back of the house so couldn't no one see them.

JD: So, you were very much aware of what was going on.

JB: Yes, during that time.

JD: Yeah, I knew—I had heard that a number of teachers were sort of behind the scenes doing things they couldn't do publicly.

JB: Right, because , many times they wanted lemonade or tea cakes, and I would cook and fix them some refreshments, you know, while they were passing through. They would stop and eat with me and move on, or stop and eat and, you know, we'd share ideas. But, like you said, behind the scene, I was very active, but out front, I was afraid—not necessarily afraid, because I really didn't have sense enough to be afraid. I didn't know what to expect, but I needed to work, so I just kept a low key there.

JD: Sure. So, what was—you came back to—you came to Tchula in what year, then?

JB: '63.

JD: Okay, so that was when things were really getting underway with SNCC—

JB: Right.

JD: With the Freedom Vote that fall, and also the Freedom Summer of the next year, when there were about 30 volunteers coming in.

JB: Right.

JD: Tell us about what you remember about Freedom Summer.

JB: Freedom Summer, for me, was the time when a man named Abe and somebody came—

JD: Abe Osheroff, yeah.

JB: Yeah. Came to work with the Mileston community. And at that time they were talking about building a place to meet, because they were meeting in an old dilapidated church there in that same area. So, Abe came in, and they built that—what we called the Mileston—was it Mileston?

JD: Community Center.

JB: Yeah, Mileston Community Center. And that's where we would start meeting. Now, I could go there, because it was at home, okay?

JD: Um-hmm.

JB: But, anyway, during that time, it was very—quite a few people were working and quite a few people were attending the, you know, the—I guess you call it the work session that they were having as to how to do when you get ready to vote and how you conduct yourselves and all of that. They prepared people to go out and vote.

JD: Sue and Henry Lorenzi—

JB: Prepare people to *register* and later to go out and vote.

JD: Yeah. Sue and Henry Lorenzi came down in the fall of '64. Do you remember them?

JB: Right. I remember them, yes! Remember them very well, very well. Sue was a young lady, Henry was a young fellow, and Henry told me one thing I never will forget. He said, "Mrs. Burns, you're going—" no, he said, "You don't—" how did he put that? [30:00] "Mrs. Burns, you think people are like you." I said, "How is that?" He said, "You're honest and fair. People are not honest and fair." I never will forget that! [Laughter] He told me people are honest and fair—you know, *I* was honest and fair. He said, "People are not honest and fair." [JD laughs] And he looked at me just as strange. [Laughs]

JD: Yeah, I've heard some Henry stories.

JB: [Laughs] Oh, Henry was something else, now. He would tell you just what he thought about you , though. But at the same time, he really worked hard to help the people in the community. I appreciate that, too.

JD: So, we have then the Freedom Summer coming on and the formation of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. Now, was your husband involved in all of this?

JB: He was. He was one of the ones who actually did the teaching of the registration, voter get-out, and all like that, along with—I don't know whether anyone ever mentioned to you Reverend Whitaker.

JD: Yeah!

JB: Do you remember Reverend Whitaker?

JD: Yeah, um-hmm.

JB: Reverend Whittaker. They all worked together. Reverend Russell?

JD: Um-hmm.

JB: Um-hmm. And there was a young lady by the name of Emma Nola Williams. Do you remember her?

JD: No.

JB: Emma Nola Williams worked in that class also. Bernice Montgomery?

JD: Yeah. She was a teacher, wasn't she?

JB: Right. She was a teacher, too, um-hmm. But those were the ones who—Bernice was working in—well, she came to Mileston, too. I'm talking about the ones who really was—all of these people I named were staying in the Mileston community except Reverend R. L. Whitaker. He lived in Tchula. But he was a person who wanted to have a better life, so he would come down and work with them, you know.

JD: Um-hmm.

JB: And there was another young man named Marshall. Marshall was out from the Rosebank Mount Olive community. I believe it was F. D. Marshall. Do you remember that name?

JD: Um-hmm.

JB: Okay.

JD: Yeah.

JB: Anyway, they all worked together. And that's how the CDGM Head Start program got started.

JD: Yeah.

JB: They worked with that.

JD: I'm particularly glad to have you, as a teacher here, teaching during this time, because it was in 1965 that a federal court ordered Holmes County to begin desegregating its all-white schools.

JB: Okay.

JD: Talk about that from your perspective, from the perspective of your high school and the parents of the kids.

JB: At that—during the year '65, I was not teaching. I was pregnant. You know, during that time, if you were pregnant, you couldn't teach school.

JD: Yeah.

JB: But, anyway, my son was going into the first grade or second grade, I'm not sure. And he was one of the ones who went to the Tchula Consolidated—no, the Tchula High School,

which was a white school in town. They children who came out of first grade that year went to first grade at that school to integrate it.

JD: Your son was one of those?

JB: My son was one of them.

JD: Tell us about his experiences and your feelings as a parent.

JB: Well, now, as a parent, we were trying to make life better for everyone. And everybody was afraid, now, because they went to school, and I don't know whether it was a week or a month or what-have-you, but the school burned down!

JD: Oh, my gosh!

JB: They burnt the school down when they found out that the black people were coming in! And the next—after the children didn't get scared and run, or their parents didn't pull them out, they burned another segment, another part of the school down. [Laughs] They was trying to run them out!

JD: Wow!

JB: But my son and that group, they stayed.

JD: How many were in that group of black kids that integrated?

JB: I think it was 16 in his first grade class. I don't know.

JD: Really? So, it was a considerable number then?

JB: Right, right. I don't know about the other class. I just remember the class that my son was in. I think it was 16 in his class. And Christopher Epps—have you heard of him?

JD: Yeah.

JB: Christopher Epps was my son's classmate. Christopher now is director of Parchman.

JD: Yeah. Did he have—would he come home at night crying about—?

JB: No, no, he never did complain about anything. But his teacher—his teacher would whoop him. [Laughs]

JD: Yeah.

JB: He didn't like getting a whooping at all!

JD: Um-hmm. Did he make any white friends there or—?

JB: They weren't there! They left!

JD: Oh, all the whites left?

JB: They all left!

JD: I see.

JB: When the blacks got there, they—all the whites left.

JD: I see. So, it was just a public school with—

JB: It left it all-black.

JD: So, re-segregation happened there really early then?

JB: That's right.

JD: Has it remained that way ever since?

JB: Been that way ever since, so they finally got rid of the—I think there's one building left, and that was a shop building. The shop building is there now. But they burned everything else down.

JD: Wow.

JB: Um-hmm. They were determined not to be there with those black children. They went to Cruger and developed the Cruger-Tchula Academy.

JD: Okay.

JB: I don't know what it was called before then, but later on it turned out to be the Cruger-Tchula Academy. [35:00]

JD: So, here—like, we grew up—we were in Jackson at the time.

JB: Okay?

JD: And there was integration of schools and, for a while, you had black and white kids going to school together. And then, the whites would pull out. But this happened just practically overnight here?

JB: It did. It did here. When they found out that the blacks—the same black group of people from Mileston who were not afraid to go register to vote had children. All of those children went together to integrate the Tchula Consolidated School. And when they found out that that's what was going on, they just started burning the place down.

JD: Yeah.

JB: Um-hmm.

JD: And then they built the segregationist academy?

JB: Right.

JD: Shortly thereafter.

JB: After that, right.

JD: So, then you came back to school to teach in '66?

JB: I came back in '67. I was out two years.

JD: '67, and—well, talk about that experience.

JB: That was a pleasant experience for me. I had no problem coming back to school. I had no problem coming back to school, nor the facility, nor the setup that was there. It wasn't smooth sailing, but it was better than I was first introduced to.

JD: Um-hmm. What kind of opportunities were there for your students? Did many of them get to go on to college or junior college?

JB: Many went on to college. And some did go to junior college, but at that time—

JD: See, Holmes had—was open by then.

JB: Right, it was open then. They would go right on to college.

JD: Where would they go?

JB: Mississippi Valley State, Jackson State, and Alcorn, still going into a predominantly black area. That's all they were used to.

JD: Yeah.

JB: And by that time, really, *they* were the ones who were recruiting those students who wanted to come. It was recently that the white institutions came to recruit the black children.

JD: Yeah. When was—do you recall when the first of your high school students went to Ole Miss or one of the white schools?

JB: Ah, now, that's been *very* recently.

JD: Really?

JB: Um-hmm.

JD: Ole Miss desegregated, of course, in '62, and there were a handful, and now there are more black students there than there are at Tougaloo.

JB: [Laughs] Because we had a student to finish about four years, maybe five years ago, and he was—I mean, he enrolled at Ole Miss and he was accepted. I don't know whether you've heard of Antwayn Patrick, the Patricks down on Marcella 37.

JD: Yeah.

JB: He finished at Ole Miss, attorney. So, [37:33]—no, it must have been about '80—'92, '93, somewhere like that.

JD: So, compare that with now. Are there more kids going to college now than back then, or fewer, or are they going to different places?

JB: Back then, there were few, and the problem then was because of finances. They didn't have grants and loans and fellowships and scholarships like they have now. And that made the number few, because parents were not able to send them off to school. But now, you have more students, I think, going to school, but I really want to believe—I hope I'm wrong—that they're going for the wrong reason. Because I see them going to school, and all of a sudden they get the grant money and go buy a car.

JD: Oh?

JB: And they drop out of school. Now, compared to what happened then as to what's going on now, the majority of the students went to school then for a good purpose.

JD: Yeah.

JB: They had a reason for going. But now—

JD: Well, they were—nobody was paying them.

JB: That's right. Now, they're trying—children now are trying to beat the system.

JD: Yeah.

JB: And that's bad. But I see a lot of that in my community in Holmes County.

JD: Any of them going to online—doing online college?

JB: I hear quite a bit of that, too.

JD: Yeah.

JB: I hear some of the teachers are getting their degrees that way, online.

JD: What do you think of that?

JB: I think it's bad. I think it's robbing our students of the very necessity of being trained by people who have been trained.

JD: Yeah.

JB: Now, believe it or not, those people who are getting those degrees online, as compared to how I got mine, I just don't see them being as concerned as I was.

JD: Yeah.

JB: Now, I'm working right along there with them now.

JD: Um-hmm, yeah. Well, this is certainly a—and you read recently where these are places where students have gotten college loans, and the online universities have taken them, and the dropout rate is just overwhelming.

JB: It is, and they're crippling the poor child.

JD: Yeah. Well, I want to turn to something now that is a very interesting thing, and that is the election [39:39]. Tell us why you ran for the school board and about that campaign. Was that your first venture into electoral politics?

JB: [Laughs] It was. I ran because, like I said, keeping with the Movement now. And I knew the situation when it comes to education because I'd been a parent, or a teacher, and I said, "Well, let me do something [40:00] to make it better." If I was a board member, I could do something about the problem that I was facing. So, I ran and I was elected. I stayed there until, hmm, '75 or '76.

JD: Did you campaign for the election?

JB: I did. I did.

JD: Tell us about that.

JB: I campaigned hard.

JD: Did you go out and knock on doors?

JB: Not really knock on doors, per se, just out there in the churches and the communities, letting people know that I was out there, interested in making a better life and education for the children and the teachers. And everybody went for it! Campaigning during that time is not like campaigning now.

JD: Yeah.

JB: If you had a cause or a reason to go, they would support you, because they wanted things to be better. And that's the way it went for me.

JD: Now, you won against a white candidate.

JB: Well, unfortunately, his name was not on the ballot. Let me go back. When I set out to run, he was alive and well.

JD: Oh, I see. You shocked him to death? [Laughs]

JB: [Laughs] I guess about the first time a black person *opposed* him, he just couldn't take it, and he died—was it the night before the election or two nights before the election?

JD: Oh, my!

JB: I said when I started out, he was alive and well, now.

JD: Yeah.

JB: But he just couldn't make it. Martin Smith, I never will forget it, from down there at Thornton.

JD: So, by now, the schools are overwhelmingly or totally black, and yet you're still having whites in positions of power.

JB: Right.

JD: You still had a white superintendent.

JB: Had a white superintendent and white board members, white attorney, white everything. When I won the election, I think I was the second black person on the board. The others were all white. There was a lady on there already by the name of Arenia C. Mallory. The Saints Academy is named for her.

JD: Oh, the—?

JB: Dr. Mallory.

JD: Dr. Mallory was on the—?

JB: She was on the board.

JD: Oh, she was?

JB: Um-hmm.

JD: What kind of a board member was she?

JB: Well, Dr. Mallory was okay. But, you know, she just—ooh, how can I describe her? She saw things the way the white folks saw things. And she told me one day, right across the table from me, said, "You're sitting up here and you're trying to get everything them white folks—no, everything them black folks ask you for. They're going to make you a laughing stock of the community after awhile." I just couldn't believe that!

JD: Yeah, yeah.

JB: Because everything the teachers and the parents would ask for, I didn't have any better sense, I went and told the superintendent and the board what we wanted. And she thought that was too aggressive, I guess, because she didn't ask for anything. She didn't bother about anything. Everything was okay for her. But she was on the board, but she had the academy going. Well, it was a college; it wasn't an academy.

JD: Yeah. Well, I know I had heard a lot about her, that she was very opinionated.

JB: Right.

JD: And that she had her way of doing things, and that was the way to do it.

JB: Uh-huh.

JD: So, you were on there with her. How many were on the school board?

JB: Five.

JD: And there were three whites?

JB: Three whites and two blacks.

JD: Talk about what—what issues did you deal with on the school board during the time you were there?

JB: We'd deal with the issues of staffing, mostly, funding, and we ended up dealing with building, teacher shortage, not enough teachers, poor curriculum structure, just everything that we're dealing with now.

JD: Now, in the schools, the whites pull out. Are there still whites teaching in the school?

JB: Yes, sir, we've got whites still teaching.

JD: Yeah, I mean, but back then, some stayed, some went with the—

JB: *All* of them left.

JD: Oh, they did?

JB: *All* of them left. The children left and the teachers left. But the academies began to phase out, you know, all the academies. We've got one, I think, in Holmes County, and that's in Lexington. So, the teachers didn't have anything to do. You understand where I'm coming from now?

JD: So, if the academy—where did the whites go to school if the academies phased out?

JB: They went to other public schools. They didn't come back to Holmes County, now.

JD: Oh, okay.

JB: They went to Greenwood and Yazoo City.

JD: So, it was white flight then?

JB: Yes! They left the educational system altogether.

JD: Um-hmm. And their families moved, or did they just pay to go to the other schools?

JB: They paid to go. But in Durant, you know, they set up the separate school district in Durant. And that accommodated the whites, because the whites in this area who couldn't afford to pay for the academies, they went to the Durant school, and they stayed in operation. But eventually, all of the whites left there because there was an influx with black students.

JD: So, all the white teachers left, but on the school board, you hired whites to teach in the schools here?

JB: Yes.

JD: These were younger people usually?

JB: Younger people with different kinds of experiences.

JD: Did they work out okay?

JB: They did. They worked out well. [45:00]

JD: So, what was the racial makeup of—when you—you say you left the board in '76?

JB: '76, right.

JD: What was the racial makeup of the faculty, generally? I know you don't—

JB: Black and white?

JD: Yeah.

JB: We probably had, at the most, probably two whites in each school, at the most. There was not necessarily a white teacher, but a white was there.

JD: Yeah. And when did you have the first black superintendent?

JB: The black superintendent came along with the election of William Dean. I'm not sure what year that was. I'm not good with dates like that. William Dean. Have you heard of him?

JD: Was it in the '80s or '90s or more recently?

JB: Late '80s.

JD: Late '80s. So, you had a white superintendent up until then?

JB: Right, up until then.

JD: Yeah. Before we let you go, there's something that I'm really interested in having you—an aspect of your professional career that I want you to talk about.

JB: Okay.

JD: And that is you were an active participant in the research conducted on the black family in Holmes County by University of Illinois Professor Dimitri Shimkin and his associates, and the result was a highly praised book, *Extended Family in Black Societies*, published in 1968. Tell us about that project and your role in it.

JB: That project grew out of, like I said, the Milton Olive Corporation. There was a Milton Olive Corporation that helped to initiate the Holmes County Health Research Program. From the Holmes County Health Research Program, we went through, house-to-house, door-to-door, studying students, studying *people*, and we found that there were people who had more hypertension problems than we had realized. We didn't know what to expect. And then, we discovered that there was a child as young as six years old suffering from hypertension. I never will forget that. That was hard to believe, because I thought that was an old person's disease.

JD: Yeah, yeah.

JB: But the child [in it] with hypertension. That was a situation where we all would meet together, and they go out and survey families' health condition. And with the health condition, they also probed into the economic condition and all of that. They would go around to see if you have bathrooms and running water and all that kind of stuff. It really was a time where the Holmes County Health Research was trying to find out what did people have in Holmes County, health-wise, and it worked out well with Dr. Shimkin and—oh, I can't call the other name.

JD: And what was your role?

JB: My role was secretary of the Holmes County—no, my role was secretary for the Milton Olive Corporation, which funded the Holmes County Health Research Program. And I was just a go-between between the University of Illinois and the Holmes County people. So, I was—I guess I was just all around, finding out what was going on, and I would communicate with Dr. Shimkin as to what we needed to do, and I would feed it to the people in the Holmes County Health Research Program or the Corporation, and they would carry out those activities.

JD: What kinds of things did you recommend?

JB: I recommended that we needed to look at economic development, we needed more money within the county, and eventually there was a program developed called Robert Kennedy Economic Development, and [48:38] was the chairperson of that. The things that Dr. Shimkin would tell us that we needed, I would share with the community people, and they would, you know, come up with a way of developing them.

And from that, also, now, we were talking about lunches in the schools. The Holmes County Health Research Program looked at what was going on in the school, especially when the

child got to be up to third grade, and that's why we decided to have lunches for the children—breakfast. We started with the breakfast, because the lunch was—

JD: What about health care? Did you have a component there?

JB: In the school system?

JD: Well, in the study. When you said you studied health care, were there any solutions proposed or programs initiated? Of course, you had the community health center coming in at some point.

JB: Right. Well, with Dr. Shimkin and I can't think of this other doctor's name, but anyway, he came by and we developed a health facility, something like a clinic. And from that clinic, you know, we were able to study and work with some of those people who had problems—not eradicate them, now. We studied and worked with them in order that they would have a better health—

JD: You also studied black migration. [JB coughs]

JB: Yes, we did.

JD: What were your findings there?

JB: The population shift within the county. [50:00] At one time, there were plantations all around. And the population shifted because in the cities, like Lexington and Pickens and Goodman and Durant, they built apartments. And the people on the plantation came into the city, and they left nothing out into the country. So, they migrated to the city.

JD: Yeah. Well, by then sharecropping was—

JB: Dwindling, dwindling fast.

JD: Um-hmm, urbanization was taking over. What about—did you deal with Northern migration at all? You talked about members of your own family leaving. Was that something that you studied?

JB: We didn't study that, but we noticed that it was going on because, like you said, people in the community, they left and went to Chicago for a better job, or Wisconsin, Peoria, Illinois. Believe it or not, the majority of the people who left here settled in some of those areas: Chicago, Peoria, Wisconsin, and like that.

JD: Yeah. Did you study at all the impact of the Civil Rights Movement on families?

JB: I cannot recall. Obviously, you know, we could see that [JB coughs] things were changing and things were getting better for them because of the Civil Rights Movement. Many people never thought that they were in the shape that they were in until they were looked at by those civil rights workers, you know. It opened your eyes to a whole lot of things, um-hmm, called your attention to a lot of things, you know. I guess we were poor and we didn't know we were poor until someone told us we were poor. [Laughs]

JD: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Tell us a little bit about your career over the last 35 years. We've taken you up until the end of the school board. What have you done since?

JB: After the school board—no, *while* on the school board, I worked at Valley, English and literature. Stayed until '76, came back into the schools of Holmes County, and I've been working in the public system of Holmes County ever since then. Oh, pretty good, pretty good.

JD: What are you—are you still teaching?

JB: I'm still teaching there.

JD: Oh, good!

JB: I'm teaching three hours a day, part-time. I retired in '06, 2006, but they told me then they were looking for someone to replace me in my foreign language department. I teach French. And here it is 2012, '13, and they haven't found a person yet. [Laughs]

JD: So, when did you pick up French?

JB: I did French when I was a student at Valley. And being on the school board, you just about know what's coming down the pike.

JD: Yeah.

JB: We were trying to include—revamp our curriculum, make it better, and I had a chance to look at the curriculum from the state. You always try to compare what our district was doing as to what the state had done or what the state had to offer. And I saw that foreign language was coming into the state. It was mandated that each child who goes into a state institution had to have a foreign language. So, I said, "Uh-huh! Now, I can experience more on my foreign language," and I went back to school and got me some French.

JD: Where did you go?

JB: I went to Valley—oh, I was telling the children about it and one, "Ooh, Mrs. Burns, you went to school in every school in the state, didn't you?"—I went to Mississippi State and went to Delta State.

JD: Uh-huh. So, you got certified in that?

JB: Right!

JD: And now you're indispensable! [Laughter]

JB: I would go every summer, you know.

JD: Yeah.

JB: Nothing to do during the summer. You know, teachers don't have anything to do, so I spent my vacation in school.

JD: Yeah.

JB: And I'm still there with it. And I love my job, I really do. It's something I enjoy doing, and I don't consider it a job. *Now* I don't because I go if I feel like it, but I feel like going every day. God has been good to me. So, I get up and go to work every day and I have fun with my job.

JD: Well, I just want to thank you very much for sharing—

JB: Can I ask just one thing before you—?

JD: Yeah.

JB: [54:04] Worth Long?

JB: Beg your pardon?

JB: Worth Long?

JB: No. Now, he may have been up here, but there were so many of them, and they were spaced out in the county. All of them did not come to the Mileston community. So, he may have been here in Holmes County, but I didn't meet that name.

JB: [54:24]

JB: No problem!

JD: So, I think we're off the tape now, but off the record, thanks again for sharing your story!

JB: Oh, you know you're welcome! You know you're welcome!

[Recording ends at 54:32]

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Sally C. Council