Civil Rights History Project
Interview completed by the Southern Oral History Program
under contract to the
Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of African American History & Culture
and the Library of Congress, 2015

Interviewees: Clarence Magee

Interview Date: December 1, 2015

Location: Hattiesburg, Mississippi

Interviewer: Emilye Crosby

Videographer: John Bishop

Length: approximately 1 hour, 50 minutes

START OF RECORDING

Female 1: From the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture.

EMILYE CROSBY: My name is Emilye Crosby, and today is December 1, 2015, and I'm here with Mr. Clarence Magee, and we're at the University of Southern Mississippi, in the McCain Library, at the Oral History and Cultural Heritage Center--the Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage. With me is John Bishop--or, with us is John Bishop and Guha Shankar, and we're here with the Civil Rights History Project, which is cosponsored by the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian National Museum on African American History and Culture. So thank you very much, Mr. Magee, for joining us today.

CLARENCE MAGEE: You're welcome.

EC: I was wondering if you'd be willing to start by talking about when and where you were born, and about your family.

CM: I was born in Marion County, Columbia, Mississippi, in nineteen hundred and--well, May 15, 1932. I have two birthdays. I have May 14, which is officially by my mother's record, because she was there.

EC: [Laughter] She would have something invested in this.

CM: Of course. The federal government came in later, said "It's the fifteenth." In order to get benefits, I say fifteenth, but I celebrate the fourteenth, okay?

EC: [Laughter] I was going to say, what do you do when you get on an airplane, right? [Laughter] So you have two birthdays.

CM: I have two birthdays. Of course. And I'm the oldest of ten siblings, five boys, five girls. One of the girls is deceased, two of the boys have passed on, so that still leaves seven of us. All at one time were married. We all have children, anywhere from two to five. My parents are the late Glessie R. Magee and Ora Bell Leggett Magee.

We grew up in the rural area of Marion County. My dad initially was a sharecropper, and he vowed, before he ever married, if he had children, that he would make sure that they went to school. So our money crop, for the most part, was cotton. He eventually ended up purchasing forty acres of land with maybe about three acres that could be cultivated, and he took an ax, and he cleared off the new ground. We would come in after school and pick up the limbs, and pile them up, and burn them, the portion that we didn't use for heating our home and for preparing our meals. See, I came up when there was no switch that you can flip and the heat comes on or the light comes on, or turn a faucet and get water. All of that, it sort of came like out of the natural--. We were nature people.

We never went hungry. We always had plenty to eat. Not a big variety, because we grew everything. We raised chickens, therefore we had our eggs and chicken for eating. We raised cows, therefore we had our milk and beef. We raised hogs, and therefore we had our pork. We grew corn. We had to gather that for the winter. We raised sweet potatoes. We had to gather those and make them for the winter. We raised sugarcane, which we made syrup from. We got water from a spring. We'd take buckets or pails, go down under the hill, pack the water back up the hills for drinking, for cooking, for bathing, for washing clothes, for feeding the livestock. [5:00]

EC: I guess that would give you an incentive not to waste the water.

CM: It gave us incentive not to waste water, but it also developed a sort of discipline to work, so we grew up having to work because of necessity. Everybody had to do their own share. There was something--. Once you got big enough, you knew what you were supposed to do. And you tried to do it before dark, because we had no electricity. We had lamps, and we had a fireplace. We'd get down in front of the fireplace and do our studies. I used, we called them--. You set up a pail and put some fat candles on top of it to make a fire, and you could study by that.

My dad may have been promoted to the sixth grade. I think my mother actually experienced the sixth grade. However, they didn't have the academic learning. They had what older people called the fifth sense. They called it "mother wits." My daddy was a very good trainer, and I use "trainer" intentionally. He taught us what to do, how to do it, and if we did not do it correctly, he taught us what we needed to do to do it, and that it was better to do a job well or not do it at all. Why spend extra time doing the same job a

second time? So we learned real fast from his training. He always encouraged us to read and to study when we went to school.

My mother worked as a house person and a mother, and in the field, chopping and hoeing cotton and corn, and picking cotton, and up until, say about 10:30 or 11 o'clock, leave the field, come home, prepare a meal, so that when we came home, there was food for us to eat. I might be going a little too far right now, but as it comes to me, I just roll it off on you.

EC: You mentioned that your parents--that your father might have finished sixth grade, and your mother, you weren't sure if she experienced sixth grade?

CM: That's the reverse.

EC: Oh, I got it wrong?

CM: Yeah, just the reverse.

EC: So did they miss not going further in school?

CM: They did. My dad. And of course, when he was younger, his dad was--. Owned his own farm, but then he did extra work in order to take them through the winter months. And my dad tells the story about his dad promising he and his sister, if he worked real well this week, "Then come next Monday, you guys can go to school." They were excited about it. So they got up early that Monday morning. They took care of their morning chores and got dressed, and they sat on the porch, and when his dad awoke, he said to my grandma, about that time, he says, "Get those children up, because we got to go do some work." She said, "The children are up. They're on the porch. They're waiting to go to school." "Sorry. Ain't nobody going to school here today. I just made a contract with this guy to clean up a new ground. That means, I'm going to take an ax,

I'm going to cut down the trees and the bushes and all that stuff, and they got to go out and pick them up and burn them." Broke my daddy's heart. Made a vow that if he ever had children, that they would go to school.

EC: Did he have trouble keeping you all in school? Was that a sacrifice?

CM: No, it was not a sacrifice. You know, in elementary school and junior high, high school, we enjoyed going to school. It was a little bit a different style of life, because we worked hard in the fields, and we worked hard to get everything done so that we could go to school. So our lifestyle, having to do things, inspired us to want to do something different. So it was a--. We were not afraid of [10:00] school. We wanted to go to school. Now, once we finished high school, we might have been a little hesitant there, but he said to us, "There will come a day when a high school diploma will not be good enough. You got to go further."

I'm the oldest, of course, so I'm the first who went to high school--. I mean, went to college. Went further than high school. And I had a few setbacks. I was in Alcorn A&M College--it's Alcorn State University now--thirty days to the day when my mother passed from childbirth, which was a total wrecker of my life. So I had to get the bus from--well, from Lorman. Someone took me from Lorman to Vicksburg to get the bus. The bus from Vicksburg took me all day to get to Columbia. My dad and my uncle met me at the bus station. After the funeral, my daddy says, "If you want to go back, you can go back." I had a choice. I chose to go back. And of course, I was not in any condition to make my grades, so basically I failed. But we had the second semester. I sort of pulled myself together, and I passed.

The other tragedy that happened was just about one month into the second semester. My daddy came down with--. He went into a diabetic coma, and I didn't know he was diabetic. But my sister who was there, who was next to me, was sort of like the person who kept everything together with my dad. She said my dad took ill. He couldn't lie down. He couldn't sit up. He just fell into bed and he was sending my younger siblings to the field, at the time of the year that you would chop, cut, take a hole, and you cut up the cornstalks. That's what they'd do to get them prepared. He sent them out one door, and she went out the back door, intercepted them, and said, "No. Go get my grandmomma," which was about maybe three miles away. So they went to my grandmother. My grandmomma got a first cousin of mine, who had a car. Came to pick my daddy up. So when they moved him from the bed to the car, that's when he went into a coma.

They took him to the hospital, and when he got the diabetes down enough so he could talk and everything, he asked--. And the docs were getting ready to release him. He said, "What must I do now when I go back home?" They said, "You don't go home and sit down. You go home and work as hard as you ever worked." But then they put him on a diet, pretty much oatmeal. No sugar. At that time, I think he had to draw his urine and put a tablet in, and it would determine whether or not the glucose was up or lower. But he finally graduated from that, I think to insulin. Then eventually, it went in remission. He lived to be like eighty-four years of age, and he didn't die of diabetes. He died of congestive heart failure.

All that tied into my schooling. I could have says, after my mother passed, "I'm satisfied." That would have been a terrible mistake. I could have said after my--.

Because I had to come home when Daddy went into diabetes and stay a whole week. When he came back, he said the words again. "If you want to go back, you can go back." I thank God I had the courage to go back, and I was able to finish. That's tied in with their education and how we were motivated to go to school, to get the grades.

And of course my daddy eventually married a couple of years after my mother died. He married a person who was a teacher. Of course, she had no children of her own, so that left my older sister and two other sisters there, two brothers there.

Well, what happened to the other brother and the other sister? Well, when I grew up, [15:00] when we grew up there, we were across the lane from my daddy's mother, my grandmother. We loved to stay at Grandmomma's house. My older brother loved to stay there more than anybody else. When we finally moved from there to the property he purchased, my mother would not take this boy. She let him stay there. She raised him, and when my mother passed, the two younger siblings were girls. The baby was eighteen months old, and the other girl had to have been like four years old. So my grandmomma took them during them in between her death and my daddy sort of getting himself settled, settled down. So she ended up raising those two girls. Now she raised my older brother, two girls.

My older brother, when he got out of high school, he volunteered to go in the armed service. So that left her with no boy, so she came to my daddy's house and said, "You have two boys. I came to get a boy. I need a boy." My baby brother was there, heard it, and he volunteered.

EC: [Laughs]

CM: She took him, but then when she got him back home, she discovered he had not been trained to plow. [Laughter] So she took him--.

EC: Back?

CM: [Laughter] To trade him off, to get the other brother. So the baby brother cried, and she said, "That's okay. That's all right. I'll keep you." So she ended up really raising four of my siblings. Was it four? Yeah, four of my siblings. But they could not go anyplace without permission from my daddy. Now my grandmomma would whip, but if you did something that you really needed a whipping, "I'm just going to tell your daddy."

EC: How far away did she live from you?

CM: About three miles after that.

EC: So it's--.

CM: Yeah, it's pretty--.

EC: But three miles is further then than it is now.

CM: Oh, yes. Yeah, yeah. Well, it was--. No, no. It was closer then. God, we could run three miles.

EC: [Laughter] You weren't used to being in the car, right?

CM: Exactly.

EC: You had to get there.

CM: Yeah. We run three miles, across the fields, across the pastures, and get there. Sure.

EM: Yeah. So I was wondering, not many people of your generation had the opportunity to go to college. Sometimes they had to work. I know you were working,

but was it hard for your father to give up your labor to go to college, or even to attend school every day?

CM: You know, no, I don't think it was. It was not hard for him to give it up. He just made the adjustment. I plowed a mule, and I was so interested in going to school, he would have to say to me, "Don't you burn my mule out. You take a furrow, you go to the other end. When you get to the end, you don't do it the lazy way, just stand there and pull the mule, let it. You pick up your plow, and you sort of make a swing. The mule turns, you turn. Boom. You're going back the other way. And you get there, you do the same thing. Boom." And a mule doesn't know when it's too hot or not too hot. So he had to caution me, "Don't you get the mule too hot."

But when I left and went to college, that left one, two, three boys initially at the house, and then Grandmomma took one. My daddy finally got a tractor, which I never got an experience to use. So he made up with that by having a tractor.

Then after practically all of us had moved out, he started cattle instead of cotton. He had at least thirty or forty heads of cows, but of course that kept him close, because he had to watch them at all the time, because he never knew when a calf was going to drop, or when he had to get a veterinarian to come in and take care of his cows.

And then, of course, he finally got out of that, and he did what he loved to do, and that was fish. I told my dad, "I never knew that you loved to fish. When I was a boy, we never went." The only time we went to fishing, we went down on the creek, and it was thick. It was hot. A lot of mosquitoes, and the snakes, and if you didn't catch anything, you went down there to catch a meal, but you came back starving. He said, "I couldn't

take a chance on maybe, going to fish. I had to do whatever produced the food right now." But he turned out to be a real good fisherman. He loved it.

EC: He must have enjoyed having a chance to relax a little.

CM: Yes. He loved it. He loved it. That's schooling. Okay.

Now, the biggest training that my daddy gave his children was--. Picking [20:00] cotton is a hot job. Picking cotton, you have to--. You see, there is a slight in doing everything, to make it easy. Cotton grows in burrs, so you reach for cotton out of the burr, you make sure you get it the first time. You can't be going two and three times in that burr, one burr. So he would pay us one penny per pound. So if I picked a hundred pounds of cotton a day, I earned a dollar for the whole day, and I didn't have to spend it on anything but myself, because we had food at home. Everything, we grew it. He taught us how to weigh our cotton, and then he taught us to get a little pad to put down our poundage and add them up. This is schooling. This is training. That's how my dad was a trainer.

Whenever he took a bale of cotton to the gin, and it produced seeds, you can take the seeds and sell them, or you can bring them home. If he sold the seeds, he came back, and he sat down, and said, "Okay, y'all come on now. Figure how much I owe you." And he paid each one of us a penny per pound. Now, I learned to pick over two hundred pounds of cotton a day.

EC: You were a wealthy man.

CM: [Laughter] Brothers and sisters. Now, there were one or two who couldn't pick cotton. They just never--. Everybody can't do the same thing. They just could never pick cotton. But the first time I beat my dad picking cotton was the morning I

came--. He and my siblings had gone to the field earlier, so I had milked the cows. We had no pastures at that time, so you put a rope on your cow. You'd take her to a green spot, stake it down so she can eat around that circle. So I had to do some chores and do that. When I came with him, he scolded me for being late. I got mad. Unlike today, I'd dare say nothing to my dad. I'd just beat him picking cotton. [Laughter]

EC: You expressed your dissatisfaction?

CM: From that day forward, every day. Whether I came at the same time he did, or I didn't come the same time, I'd beat him picking cotton.

EC: I don't suppose he did that on purpose, did he? [Laughs]

CM: No, he didn't do it on purpose, [Laughter] but--.

EC: Motivated you.

CM: He did. It motivated me, you know.

EC: Yeah. What were your schools like coming up?

CM: Oh, that's a different story. Initially, from elementary school up until maybe I was about--. Hmm. Ten years of age. I started early, at age five. We would walk from where we live better than a mile to catch a bus. My auntie's husband had made a bus, or borrowed a bus, and he used the bus to pick children up to take to school. Now, I think the school supplemented that. But we'd walk that mile and a half, hot, rain, cold, whatever, to get that bus. I only remember maybe one time not catching the bus. And of course, my daddy being the motivator that he was, we don't miss buses, you know. Cold, standing up there in the rain, under a pecan tree, many mornings waiting. The white kids had a bus that drove right by their house. Or, what to say? It was not a homemade bus, okay? [Laughter] A real bus, yes.

EC: Did you think about that at the time?

CM: At the time, it didn't bother you that much. It really didn't. Our books were books that had been used four or five years, because there were other kids' names written in the books, so we had hand-me-down books. The parents of the school had to cut wood to heat the schools in the wintertime. They had a huge stack of wood out there. They would bore a well at the school, so you can get water from the well. There was no indoor plumbing. There was no indoor restroom. Everything was under the hill, away from the school, [25:00] so you can imagine what that was like. Rain, cold, whatever, you know. Smelly and all that.

But we didn't know we were in poverty. We only learned that once we saw the TV talking about people in poverty. That motivated a lot of kids. Some of them it didn't. A lot fell by the wayside. Their parents were loggers, pulpwood haulers, stump haulers. They made a little money, so that was exciting to their kids, so their kid would go out and make a living and get married.

My dad had a little close to tighter rein on us than generally people in the neighborhood, because he focused on education a whole lot more than others did. And, of course, once the neighborhoods knew that, they helped to keep us in the right path. If we wanted to run with the group of boys, and they see us, say, "I'm going to tell your dad." That's all they needed to say, and we'd straighten up. It kept us out of a lot of trouble.

EC: I was raised out at Alcorn, so I'm especially curious. I was wondering if you could tell me what Alcorn was like at that time.

CM: You were raised at Alcorn?

EC: Yes, sir.

CM: Okay.

EC: I moved there in 1973.

CM: Seventy-three. [Laughs] I went out there in 1950. It was just a cattle path from Lorman to Alcorn. I mean, at some places you couldn't meet another vehicle. You had to choose your place, where you'd meet other vehicles. It was either up and down or around and round. And that's just the way it was. In the wintertime, the buildings were heated by a boiler. If everything worked well, you had heat, but if it didn't, you didn't have heat. Of course, you had--. The buildings were old, and of course, you've got a problem with that.

The children who attend Alcorn were rural children. They came from the country, basically. Being an agricultural school, they raised poultry, so you could work at the poultry plant as a student as a part of your student aid. You could work at the swine or hog place. Other things you could do. I'm not sure if they grew any vegetables.

EC: Did they have the dairy then?

CM: Yeah, they had the dairy. They did. Yes, they did, sure, because we kept--. There was always plenty of milk, and pork, because they raised us hogs that were like that, that high. They'd grow all of that.

We were very close-knitted, because there were no nightlights close by. That's one of the reason I chose to go there. I didn't feel within myself that I could go to a city school and not be affected by the nightlife. And I had been out there, I know one summer, with the agriculture department. I stayed a week out there, so I knew about it.

They were quite strict on boys and girls being separated at a certain point. You were required to go to the vestibule service on Sunday evening. There was Sunday school class on Sunday mornings.

The bad part, we only got two meals on Sundays, and of course, coming from the country, we got three meals per day, you know, so you had to develop not having food [Laughs] on Sunday evening. I think they might give you a bag with an orange or something in it, a brown bag to take home. Of course, they had their PX 'round under the chapel back there. You'd go around there and get some candy bars or stuff like that, if you had the money, but people like me, I'd have no money.

Tuition was very low, but then, I worked to take care of my room and board. I did--. They had a model home there for the senior homemakers, where they went in and spent, I don't know where, half a semester, where they had to do meal plannings and all of this kind of stuff, and practice purchasing meals and preparing meals, and do all the things homeowners do. I worked there for, [30:00] I don't know how long, but taking care of the floors of that building. Then, one year, I worked at pest control. We'd get big bags of baits, and I'd have to take it and put it in a small package, and then distribute it wherever there were mice and so forth. I did that. Then, one time, I worked as a person who would take out the garbage off the female dorm hall. I got the name KT. All of my close friends knew me as KT, Kotex kid.

EC: [Laughter] That's a nickname you want to carry through life, right?

CM: Well, see, look. I learned that these things are said to get a reaction, but I learned how not to react. If you say, "Hey, KT Kid," I was like, "Hey, how are you

doing?" Only you and I know what we're talking about, so what's the problem, you know? You learn how to respond or not respond.

M1: Do we need to break for--?

EC: What did you study at Alcorn?

CM: Biology major.

EC: And what did you do when you left Alcorn?

CM: I went to service, two years' service. I was--.

EC: In the draft?

CM: Yeah, I was drafted, and I was drafted before I left school. My daddy knew the draft lady, and as long as I was in school, I got deferred. I'd come home for summer and work, go back to school, let them know I was back in school. So my senior year, she sent me a draft notice before the year was over, with a handwritten note, "If you're not ready to go right now, ignore it." So I finished, and then a couple of months after I finished, then my draft came up, and I went in.

EC: So was that just an informal agreement? That wasn't the policy then, was it?

CM: No, that was not a policy. My dad--. I don't know. I can't remember where the lady who was managing the draft board, or not. Anyway, somehow he got acquainted with her, and she agreed that as long as I was in school, I could be deferred. If I wanted to leave, I could have gone, but I'm glad I was able to stay.

EC: Yeah. What did you do after service?

CM: After service, I came back. But when I went in service, I was living in La Marion County.

EC: Marion?

CM: Marion County. Marion County. I said La Marion, La Marion, La Mar--. That was the name of the school, La Marion. Lamar-Marion. La Marion Vocational High School. I taught a month there in between graduating and the time I was to leave. When I was discharged, we were living here in Hattiesburg then, because my dad had assisted my wife in purchasing a home here that belonged to his sister-in-law that was moving away. I was in Germany when the home was purchased, and I added my name to it after I got back home, so it was joint ownership.

EC: Were you looking to move to Hattiesburg, or was it just an opportunity?

CM: No, just an opportunity. I married while I was in service, and my wife was--. I met her in Marion County. She was working there. I came home on a furlough. We got engaged before I had to--. I think two furloughs. Got engaged. I went back and got orders to go to Germany. They gave me a thirty-day furlough before I went, so I came back home, and I got married while I was here. And I left, and I went to Germany for eleven months and fourteen days, so it's in between that period that the house became available. The house was purchased, so when I came out of service, I ended up here.

EC: Was your wife working in Hattiesburg then, while she was waiting on you to come back?

CM: Yes, she had gotten a job here in Hattiesburg then.

EC: Was she a teacher, too?

CM: Yeah.

EC: What level? What school was she teaching at?

CM: She was in a high school at the time, in Marion County, and when she came here, she worked at Rowan and the high school. She worked there until Lillie Burney was constructed, and then she went to Lillie Burney. Then after Lillie Burney, during the early part of desegregation, she went to Hawkins. And then I [35:00] took her away from the city in [19]74. We went to Mobile. I started working with the federal government.

In between those times, I did teaching as well. When I came out of service in [19]56, I got a job in Waynesboro. I filled out an already-expired term of a previous teacher that for some reason they let go. I worked there for one year. Then I worked at Prentiss Institute for two years, in the high school department, but coached the college basketball team. Then I got a job here starting at an elementary school, and I came in. I taught a combination of sixth and seventh graders combined. There was one full class of seventh graders and one full class of sixth graders, and the overflow I had combined. I did that probably like three years. Then when Lillie Burney opened, I went to Lillie Burney as well. I left Lillie Burney in [19]69, and I went to Rowan High School.

I left there. I went with the Southern Mississippi Planning and Development District for approximately two years. And after that, in between that, I got employment with the federal government, Department of Agriculture, Food, and Consumer Service. I retired from them. But in order to take that job, I needed to move to Mobile, so that's when I went to Mobile, in [19]74, and I worked from [19]74 to [19]95. Came back to Hattiesburg, but I was still in the same job, but my office was located in Jackson. I worked there about three years before I retired.

EC: Commuting to Jackson?

CM: Yeah. And it was not bad, because at that time, we had started working compressed hours, ten hours a day, four days a week.

EC: Oh, so you didn't have to go five days?

CM: I didn't have to go five days. That program started when I was in Mobile. The day the staff decided what days they were going to take off, I was in the field, so when I came back--.

EC: You had what was left. [Laughs]

CM: And that was Monday. Can you believe? Monday. I go to work--. I have Monday off. I go Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday. So I'd leave here on Tuesday morning, spend Tuesday night, Wednesday night, and Thursday night with my sister. Friday I'm back at home. Friday night, Saturday night, Sunday night, Monday night, home.

EC: That's a pretty good situation.

CM: God looks out for people who are [Laughs] patient.

EC: [Laughter] Whatever you're doing, you're doing it. [Laughter] I could probably go back and figure it out, but did you move to Hattiesburg like in the late [19]50s? Is that right?

CM: Fifty-six.

EC: Fifty-six. So were you in the service, then, when the Brown decision came?

CM: Oh, yes. In [19]55? Yes.

EC: Was that something that you were thinking about or aware of at the time?

CM: I was aware of it. It was not a--. Since it was over yonder, it was not here, you know, not at that age, and not a whole lot concerned about it, but I was aware of it, yeah.

EC: How did you--. Well, I guess, what was your first awareness of race?

CM: Since I was about eight or nine years old, I guess. Yeah, sure.

EC: Yeah. Was that like going to town, or--?

CM: Going to town. But, look. In the South, the relationship between a black family and a white family could be just like this. That's not race. My daddy sharecropped with a white family who taught school during the school year. During the school year, we could move from our house to their house, which was tight, had windows, and a huge fireplace, and be comfortable.

In the springtime, we'd go back to our house, which was above the ground, had shutters for windows, had a huge living room and a kitchen, knotholes in the floor, picket roof on top [40:00] with cracks in it, so when the rain came down you had to put pails out to catch the water. When we lived in their house during their absence, we didn't have that problem. We could hear the wind outside, you know, whistling and that kind of stuff, but in our house, we could feel the winds. Cracks in the wall. The wall became our library, because they would use newspaper--not newspaper. Yeah, and cover them up with, so we'd see pictures and, you know, from study. In the winter--in the fall of the year, before we moved there, we could touch the goats through the knothole--.

EC: Through the house?

CM: The pigs through the knotholes, you know? [Laughter] It was a relationship there that we didn't have when we went to town. I can remember clearly on

two occasions. One time I was downtown, very young. I walked into something like a pool hall, and people of color didn't go in there. I wandered in there through the front door. They already caught me, and they ushered me out the back door, but back on the street. Nothing happened.

I remember once walking down the street and a car coming. I don't know how close, but it was within inches of hitting me, that, you know, that close.

When we would go to work from my house, we had to pass right by the family my daddy sharecropped with. If we ate at that house, we ate on the back porch. We didn't eat inside of the house. We sat on the back porch.

EC: Now this is the family where you would stay in their house?

CM: Mm-hmm. Yeah.

EC: So you could live in their house, but when they were there, you would eat on the back porch.

CM: Right out on the back porch, yeah.

EC: Would they ever eat at your house?

CM: No. So you watch what your parent did or did not do. They may or may not say anything, but you tell by their action that there's some places you don't go, some things you don't say. You learn to follow the leader, if you've got good leaders. You were aware of it. Of course, now I'm--. Direct experience and participation are two different things, you know, [in that way?].

EC: So what first got you--. What was your first awareness of the civil rights movement?

CM: Nineteen fifty-six, when my dad and my wife purchased our first home. He said to me, "Now that you own a home, you can pay your two-dollar poll tax, and you can register to vote." I'm not sure that he was registered at this time.

EC: I was actually wondering, yeah.

CM: Yeah, yeah. So--.

EC: But he's telling you about it.

CM: He's telling me about it. You own a home, you've got to pay property tax. So every time I'd go pay my property tax, I'd pay my poll tax. So I started going to the clerk's office, exercising my right, because I paid a poll tax to register to vote. And he'd get caught off guard. The first time I went in, a deputy clerk met me at the desk, and asked what I wanted. I told her I wanted to register. She said, "The registrar's not in today." "Well, what are his hours?" "Oh, he doesn't keep regular hours." So what am I supposed to do? She walked away. I'm not going to stand up, that's fine--I'll walk away.

It's twelve months, probably, later, that I go back and go through the same routine. This time he's in. His name is--come on. Not Theron Lynd.

EC: It was before him?

CM: The one before him.

EC: Was that Fox?

CM: [Luther] Cox.

EC: Cox?

CM: Cox. Yes.

EC: All right. Something like that. Cox.

CM: I met the same deputy at the counter, and she says, "What do you want?" I told her. She called him from the back. He walked up, and I'm standing there. He says, "What do you want, boy?" I told him. "Who sent you, boy?" I said, "Nobody." "You'd better wait." He walks away. I walk away.

The next time I go by--.

EC: Can I [45:00] interrupt? How did you feel?

CM: I didn't feel the best at that time. I--here again, it's sort of like a shock treatment. You know, here I am. I've done everything you say I'm supposed to do, and you're saying, "What do you want, boy? You'd better wait." And you're not even holding a conversation as to why I should wait. You walk away.

So the next time I go, he is no longer around. I think he's deceased, maybe. Theron Lynd is there. And by this time, they are requiring you to fill out an application, and they give you a section from the Mississippi state constitution. You copy that onto the application process, and then you interpret it. On the application, you have to identify your precinct, where you would vote, and having not voted before, that's a big task. But luckily they write the precinct number on your poll tax receipt. Ah, I remember. So I put it on there. But when he looked at it, he says, "Not quite satisfactory."

EC: "Not quite."

CM: "Not quite." And he turns, he walks away. No conversation.

EC: Other than your father, when he told you that, were you talking to anybody about this at the time?

CM: Not really. And I guess one of the reasons why is I'm still working basically out of town. I'm here on the weekend. I only come home at night out of town,

so I'm not really cognizant of the fact that others are being treated the same way. It takes me a couple, two or three years to realize that I'm not the only one that's been getting this cold shoulder.

EC: Did your wife ever try to register at that time?

CM: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. She did. She did three times. She took the test three times. I took it six. I think they have recorded five times. She was more--females are more challenging than males--.

EC: [Laughs]

CM: And that's the reason, because they're free. Male--. [Break in recording] Excuse me. The male is not free. The female is. [Laughter] Because she raised the question, "What do you mean, I didn't pass? I know I passed it." So she's getting a little bit feisty and I say, "Hey, you're going to get me in trouble. We got to go." [Laughter] But anyway. She took it three times. She recognized, for some reason, that it was the precinct that was hanging her up, but it also said, if you don't know the precinct, just put in the nearest town. She wrote, "Hattiesburg." Which means she's met all the requirements. There is nothing that she had missed, and yet he said, "Not quite satisfactory." And she wanted to know why. "Can't tell you." Walks away. I took her out.

So we never found out until the federal court took Theron Lynd to court. We, along with about forty-six or forty-four other people, mainly who were teachers, were subpoenaed to be at those trials. Actually, she got on the witness stand. I didn't. She claims that her witness broke the whole thing open, and she's probably right, because

when the prosecutor was--. I want to think his name was--. I know it, but I can't remember now.

EC: Was this the federal--?

CM: Federal second court of appeals. That would have--. Doar?

EC: Was it John Doar?

CM: Yeah.

EC: It was John Doar?

CM: Yeah, yeah. He took her application and used it as comparison with a white gentleman from Royal Spring who was a truck driver, who could not read, could not write. He had taken the test and passed it. So here they've got two applications, one from a white gentleman, one from a lady of color. He passed his. When they questioned him about it, I think--. Of course, I'm not in there. They said they asked him, "What race are you?" He said, "I haven't run a race."

EC: [Laughs]

CM: "What color are you?" "Oh, I'm white." [Laughter] You know, it was a challenge, but then, I started treating it as a [50:00] cat-and-mouse game, because every time I got a chance to go back in there, I would go. So we got--we knew each other quite well, because I would go. He would give me the test. I'd walk in there and say, "Hey." And he'd say, "You've got fifteen minutes." "Give me the test. All I want is the test." Because I was studying the Constitution. I knew they weren't getting me on that. He wasn't getting me on the precinct, because you've got it right here on my poll tax receipt, so what am I to be afraid of? Not really anything. Somebody's playing somebody, so--.

EC: When you were studying the constitution, was that something you were doing on your own, or was there--?

CM: On my own. On my own.

EC: Was the NAACP coordinating anything at this point?

CM: No. It was not coordinating this. It was on my own. Yeah.

EC: How did you all find out about the lawsuit?

CM: We were subpoenaed.

EC: So that was the first you heard about it, was being subpoenaed?

CM: No, we had talked. I guess they had interviewed us. I'm not sure. At that point, we were aware that it was going to get the point of the federal second court of appeals, but then, we had been interviewed by them.

EC: So did--. Do you know? I know that when they were doing that case, and they were doing a couple similar cases, they would try to subpoena the records, and they were having trouble getting even the records from the circuit clerks' offices, so did they know about your applications from the records, or did they know about it from Medgar Evers or somebody?

CM: No. I think they would have gotten it from the record, because Theron Lynd was taken in this time because he was being held in contempt. He had been in court before and had been ordered to stop making a difference between races, but he never stopped. So the records were debated through.

EC: I knew that they really pursued it with him.

CM: Yep.

EC: I mean, it just--. Did you ever work with Medgar Evers? Did you meet him?

CM: I knew Medgar--matter of fact, I was in school at Alcorn with Medgar Evers.

EC: So he was there at the same time?

CM: Yeah, it was the same time.

EC: I wasn't sure when he was finishing up there.

CM: Yeah, yeah. His wife and I were in the same class. I finished in the summer, and when I left the campus, he gave me a ride from the campus. That's the contact I had with him. And then of course, as I got more involved in NAACP, we had much more interaction from that level.

EC: How did you get involved with the NAACP, then?

CM: Well, the president of this county branch at that time was J.C. Fairley. We attended the same church, so this is where my first connection came with membership with the NAACP.

EC: So would he speak at church, or would he talk to people after church about--?

CM: J.C. would? Yeah. He was quite outspoken.

EC: And you just--what made you decide to join?

CM: It didn't take a whole lot, really and truly. Just one request, and I'm in.

EC: What was your motivation? I know it seems obvious, but so many people didn't.

CM: [Laughs] It's quite a--. I had experience when I was in the service that really heightened, I guess you'd say, my sensitivity to it. I was in Fort Eustis, Virginia, and there was a young man who was a minister from somewhere in Ohio, who was a white young man. He had been to a church near the camp, and he was invited to speak. On the day before he went out, he asked if I would go with him out there, and I said, "Yeah, but then are you sure I can go?" "Oh, yeah, I'm sure. I'm sure."

EC: Virginia?

CM: Virginia, yeah. "I'm sure, I'm sure." "Okay." So one of the church members came over, picked us up, drove us to the church. We got there between Sunday School and worship service.

From a teenager, my habit was, when I got to church, I would go inside. I would not stand outside like a whole lot of people do. So I went in, and I don't know, I picked up a bulletin. I was sitting over there, just looking at it, not paying a lot of attention. He came in with tears in his eyes, and says, "We can't stay here. We can't stay here." I say, "Why?" "If we stay, they won't have church." "Oh." So they brought us back to the camp. That's one thing that really stands out. It's [55:00] just, out in society is one thing, but in church, that's gross.

EC: What church did you and Mr. Fairley--?

CM: St. James Christian Methodist Episcopal Church. Yeah.

EC: Were there a lot of people from the congregation that joined the NAACP?

CM: Practically everybody were probably members in that church, yeah. At my church now, it's the same way. We're a small membership, but practically everybody

there are members of the NAACP. We encouraged them to do that, and they follow our leadership in that respect.

EC: Were you--. Once you joined, did you participate in--? Were they holding meetings?

CM: I did not attend a lot of meetings when I initially joined. As time went on, I got involved, and then a little more involved doing the Freedom Summer. We did sensitivity, especially for youngsters from the North and Midwest who came down. Since we knew the culture, we did a lot of sensitivity training, round circles, talking about what you can expect, or if you say this or if you say that. Back in some areas away, they were accustomed to calling policemen "pigs." We said, "You can't do that here. You can't call them pigs" and stuff like that. That's just one example. They were encouraged and trained to assist, but then we knew where the danger spots were. We knew what was--what comments would set people off, and things like that, so we did a lot of sensitivity training, not only here, but other parts of the state. I got acquainted with the president who succeeded J.C. Fairley, which was Dr. C.E. Smith, he and his family, and I became more involved, more involved with the NAACP, serving on the committees and things of that sort.

EC: What were some of the committees? What was some of the work you did?

CM: I remember one specifically, education committee, and that's--. What we did, we served on a biracial committee in helping the city schools develop a strategy for integrating the schools.

EC: Was that before or after Freedom--. That would have been after Freedom Summer, wouldn't it?

CM: Probably a little after Freedom Summer, yes. Yes. Yeah, yeah.

EC: And at that point, are you teaching at Rowan?

CM: I'm--. Lillie Burney, and then Rowan was in [19]69, is when I started.

EC: So you might have been at Lillie Burney?

CM: Lillie Burney, yeah, or Grace Love. The two places. Yeah.

EC: We were just talking to Mrs. Smith earlier today. So what was it that got you more involved, you know? What drew you in to become more involved?

CM: My children. We had two daughters, and I did not want them to inherit what I inherited. Everything I did was with them in mind.

EC: How old were they in the summer of [19]64?

CM: My oldest was born in [19]59--no, no, no, no, no, [19]57. The baby was born in [19]59.

EC: Did they go to Freedom Schools?

CM: No, they did not go to Freedom Schools.

EC: Kept them home, or--?

CM: Kept them home.

EC: Were you worried?

CM: No, I was not worried. We did for them what they needed to have done. We were not worried about that.

EC: You just didn't--. You just wanted to keep them at home. They didn't have to attend that.

CM: So that empowered--. That didn't stop us from working with the Freedom Summer, because our church provided housing for some of them, provided meals for

some of them, so we were involved, but we didn't put our children out there. We were involved.

EC: What are some of the things that you all were doing? I mean, you just said housing and food. Can you give me a sense of what the day-to-day was like? [1:00:00]

CM: You know that there were leaders, identified as leaders, who were at various churches where the students would come in, and they would have the classes. Somebody would provide a meal for them and some form of recreation, which is like a regular school, but mostly dealing with the civics, citizenship.

EC: Backing up before Freedom Summer, when--. Did you meet or work with any of the young people that came in with SNCC or COFO, like Hollis Watkins or--? He and Curtis Hayes stayed out on Mr. Dahmer's farm for a little while.

CM: No, no. I did not work with those persons per se. I knew about them, but--.

EC: I was going to say, and the next ones coming in maybe were Lawrence Guyot and--.

CM: Yeah, yeah. I think the biggest portion of my involvement was doing the sensitivity trainings and things like that.

EC: Making sure they understood--.

CM: Yes.

EC: The community and what the expectations were, and how to be safe. Can you--. So, the biracial committee. You said you were working on a plan or a strategy for desegregating the schools. What were those meetings like?

CM: I learned early in my involvement that the meetings that we'd attend were the second meetings. Meetings had been held prior to our meetings. So we learned to--as people of color--to come together on our education committee and role-play. We would propose questions that we were going to propose. Then we'd have somebody respond to those questions, so that when we got in the meeting, we would be conditioned to what might have been said. And also we suggested a question that might be coming to us, to be prepared to answer those. Specifically, I remember Dr. Spinks, who was superintendent of the schools; and Mr. D.I. Patrick was--I believe he was principal of Blair High School; Mrs. Earline Boyd, who probably was the chair of our education committee. I served on the committee. I'm just trying to remember who the other person--. But I remember in meetings where these two particular gentlemen were involved. D.I. Patrick was a man of--I would say hypertension. He was free with his emotion. He would stand up and put his finger in your face.

EC: That's productive.

CM: Earline Boyd was chair of that committee. And she said, "Don't point your finger in my face." He may take it down, but the next three minutes, it's back up there, and then she would put hers right in his face. So we spent a whole lot of time trying to make sure [Laughter]--.

EC: There wasn't going to be a throw-down?

CM: Trying to manage the people who were in the meeting, so that we could get to some point where we can do something positive.

EC: [Laughter] That's good practice, right? For teaching school.

CM: Anyway, they were interesting meetings. Challenging.

EC: Can you even go back that far in your head and think about what you hoped would come out of it? Obviously, you've lived all these years and seen how it's turned out, but do you remember what your hopes were at the time?

CM: We used the word "freedom," and we used it sort of loosely, without tying it down. I'm not sure we knew what the word "freedom" encompassed. Freedom of expression, freedom to go to school wherever you want to go, free from being harassed. We were harassed. We were terrorized. The word terrorist is not new. We lived it all our lives. [1:05:00]

EC: Did you have threats, direct threats, on your family?

CM: No, not really. I had--my wife had a call, during the trial, I believe it was. "Carrie, what's your opinion about this court situation?" And she was shocked. She said, "My thoughts are reserved to you."

During the trial, I wore a suit every day. In the corridors of the courthouse, there was a white gentleman, and we happened to be meeting, and it happened more than one time. He was intending to put a shoulder into me. Of course I realized what he was doing, so when he got to the point he wanted to put the shoulder, I'd just slide away. I did it more than one time.

At the end of that particular day, right where the city jail is now was pretty much parking, meters in front of it. My car was in the parking lot. When I went out of the courthouse, I saw a pickup truck, a guy standing outside talking to the one inside. I went and I got in my car. I came right by them. In that way, you had two lanes everywhere. I came right here at the corner of the post office, turned left on Pine, went to Main and turned right. Then I noticed the pickup following me.

When I got down to Walnut Street--I think it's Walnut. There used to be a traffic light just across the river over there. I hesitated until the green went off and caution, and I ran the caution. They ran the red light to follow me. When I got down to Katie--not Katie, Hall--I crossed and went over on Katie. I lived on Hall, but I lived on the east side. I took Katie and I went west. They followed me. All of a sudden, I just hit my brakes real quickly, pulled to the side, and except them noticing, they would have run over me. Well, I got off, and then when they passed me, I just followed them. And at a point, I stopped, and I turned around and came back, but they came back. They just [whoosh].

I got one call at one time. Somebody asked me something about Dr. King, and made a derogatory remark, that "I hear that he"--what did he say? Excuse my French. "I hear that he sucks." I said, "You probably know. He probably had you last night."

EC: [Laughs]

CM: [Breathes heavily] End of conversation.

EC: And you said your wife was quick. [Laughter] I guess you practiced on each other.

CM: I learned from her. [Laughs]

EC: She taught you how to talk back. I'm not sure I've asked you. Can you say what your wife's name was?

CM: Carrie.

EC: Carrie?

CM: Mm-hmm. C-A-R-R-I-E. Bradley Magee.

EC: Carrie Bradley Magee?

CM: Mm-hmm.

EC: It seems like you two were well matched.

CM: We have been. Now we're getting to the point where we want to be left alone, now. [Laughter] After sixty years.

EC: But you both retired?

CM: We retired from paid jobs, but we never retired from working in the community, working for the NAACP, and in the church, missionary work and all that kind of stuff. We never retired from that. Matter of fact, we got more rest when we got paid for it.

EC: I was going to say, that's why you look so young. You've stayed active. When you mentioned Dr. Smith, and you just now mentioned Dr. King, we were talking to Mrs. Smith, and we heard the story about her sneaking Dr. King into town, but we [1:10:00] didn't actually get her to tell that story on tape. Do you know about it?

CM: I know about it, but I have to let somebody else tell it. Unfortunately, I didn't stay for the meeting. He was late, and of course, at that time, I was working, I think in Waynesboro, and having to get up real early in the morning to drive there. I didn't get a chance to stay, because I went home and got some rest so I could get up the next morning, and that's when it happened.

EC: Do you know the--because I don't know it. Do you know the story of how she snuck him in?

CM: I've heard the story, but I don't know if I've heard it from her, so I'd better leave it where it is there.

EC: Okay. Yeah, I'm sorry we didn't get her to tell it. It's what we should have done, right?

CM: [Laughs]

EC: What did you hope school desegregation would look like? What were you working for on the committee, trying to accomplish?

CM: Better supplies. I think that was--. Better supplies. I don't think I was expecting--. Because I felt that teachers were doing a pretty good job. It could be a better job if they had the equipment and supplies. We never had a full lab. I told you earlier, we were using books that were ten years old, some of them. Supplies, equipment. I was not necessarily thinking about--I want to say rubbing shoulders with other races and so forth. Just give us supplies. Let us go where--. Why did I have to leave Hattiesburg to get a graduate degree? To me, that was uncalled for.

EC: That this university--well, it was a college then, but they had graduate programs right here in town, and you can't go?

CM: It didn't make sense, still doesn't make sense. The state would give you a little money to go to a school outside of the state. You'd have to come up with the rest of it. Fortunately, I had been in service, so I got my G.I. Bill to help me out in that. People of color didn't do too bad with what they had.

There has been some backlash. There has been some false notion as to what freedom means. There's a lot of motivation that we did on our own that we're not doing any now. I use the term "freedom ain't free." Never has been, never will be. Freedom you think you have can be lost if you do nothing, because freedom incurs a huge responsibility. You've got to get uncomfortable.

I retired. Had I said, "Hey, I've got it made. I'll sit in that chair that's killing me right now," I'd have been dead ten years ago. So, sure, you need to be active. You need to be doing something. And there's enough blame to go around to everybody who put on a dress and everybody who put on pants, when it comes to the like of properly exercising your responsibility as free citizens. We just take voting, for example. When I didn't have the card, I hungered, I thirst for it. I used my arm. I had to struggle for it, though. But now that thirty seconds or three minutes, you got it already in your hand, what is it? It isn't going to count.

EC: Does Mississippi actually give you a card, still?

CM: I've got a card, yeah.

EC: Is that a voter ID? Is that one of the new ones, or--?

CM: No. Well, voter ID is something. I don't know what they're doing with that, [1:15:00] but they give you a voter registration card.

EC: When you register, they give you a card?

CM: Yeah, they mail it to you, mm-hmm, most times. I think--and I keep using the word "false notion of freedom"--has been the biggest disappointment that I see in it. If you don't struggle for it, you really don't have the same appreciation as people who've struggled have for it.

As long as I could drive my daddy's car, I couldn't care anything about tires. I had to worry about the oil, though. Now, he taught me, pay attention to the oil and water in my car. Oil and water. Oil and water. Never said a thing about tires. Never said a thing about gas. [Laughs]

EC: Right. He wanted to make sure you didn't burn that engine up. [Laughs.]

CM: Yeah, because if the tire blew out, you're going to stop. If the gas goes, you're going to stop. But it'll keep running without water and oil until it burns up. It took me a long time to understand why he said that and didn't say the other, but he was training. He was a trainer.

EC: Did the NAACP try to recruit the first students who went to freedom of choice, or did families volunteer?

CM: Sure, there was some recruitment, but I don't think the--recruitment was not that difficult. Everybody was in the same boat. Everybody's either hungry or thirsty for education, in the same boat. Education was the ticket for the way out. We live in a society today. Who has to cut wood? Who has to bring water in? Who has to take care of hogs, chickens, cows? Who has to worry about heat? Just flip a light switch, you've got it. Comfortable. All the things that we want, we can get. Now, mind. And this has no eyes. Poverty has no eyes.

People who've not been, let's say, somehow educated, either in the schools or the family, what have you, basically get what they want, or somebody else gives them what they need. Where's the incentive to do better? Yet we're free.

I visited--and this is different. Part of my job, initially, with the federal government, was to visit stores, hold training for how you handle the food stamp authorizing, handle the food stamp, monitor the food stamp, and to visit state human resources from the administrative part to check on that, and that also took me into homes of people who got benefits and things like that. The first home I saw a cell phone in was people who were needing welfare and that kind of stuff. It took me a long time, a long

time. And of course, that's when they had these boxes in the car, in the boxes. When I finally got one, I was still in Mobile, and I never used it until I came over here.

My wife was having to drive from Mobile to Utica to take care of her dad at the time, but when we came here, that cut out a hundred miles, but she still had the distance to go. So one morning I got up. I said, "Look, I got this little phone here. I never use it. Let me hook it up in your car, turn it on, test it by calling back in the house to see if works." I tested it, and it worked. I said, "Now if you have a problem, all you have to do is pick it up and call home." She left here, went up to 59 and 49. Got out of her car to gas up, put her purse down by the tank, drove off and left it. The attendant saw it, went out, picked it up, opened it up, found the address, and called me. I said, "Okay, I'll come up and pick it up." She was in Georgetown, Mississippi, sixty miles from here, when she discovered that she didn't have it. She picked up the phone. First time we ever used it. [1:20:00] Called me and said, "I don't have it." I said, "Okay, I got it." "What must I do? Come back?" I said, "You can get a ticket coming back, so why don't you go to Momma? I'll be up in a few days, and I'll bring it to you." It took me a long time, but this is a dragon. A lot of people losing jobs and everything because they don't know how to handle this technology. That's not part of what you asked for. I'm sorry.

EC: [Laughs]

M1: We hear you.

CM: I'm sorry.

EC: Did your children participate in school desegregation?

CM: No. We sent them to private kindergarten. They went to private kindergarten. And by the time they got into their public school, then of course--. My

kids were in the tenth and eleventh grade, and one went to Hawkins. Yeah. The other went to Blair High, because she was a senior when we left here, going away. The nitty-gritty part of it, I say the hard part of it, they did not--. They were not exposed to it, you see.

EC: Do you know what the experience was like for the children that were the first ones?

CM: Only what I hear. And we've heard that just recently. We had a fifty-year celebration of the first students who went into the elementary schools, who came, who told their stories. Last--yeah, this month just past.

EC: Did any of the black teachers in Hattiesburg, did any of them lose their jobs when they unified the district?

CM: None that I know of lost their job. Hattiesburg was a unique situation. Dr. Burger, Richard--Principal Burger. I don't know if he had his doctorate or not. He would say he did not get involved much, but he was in the politics. Where the county schoolteachers were dismissed if it was known that they were a member of the NAACP, the city's teachers were not. He was sort of like a buffer between his teachers and people who would do them harm.

There was something that had happened recently during that time. Oh, yeah. The year I was at Rowan, the students walked out of school and marched from Rowan to over on Mobile Street. That was [19]69, of course. I went with them. I think a couple other teachers went with, but not everybody. We went as monitors to be sure that they did not agitate the policemen and things like that, that would cause them to react in a negative kind of way. For the graduation that they, for some reason--. I served as one of the

sponsors for the graduation that year. Mr. Burger invited myself to walk with him and Mr. Spinks from the school building across over to the football stadium, where we held the graduation that night. He knew my involvement. Other people knew my involvement. I guess that one of the reasons I accepted an offer to do something other than teacher is because of the extent of my involvement. I realized--. Of course, the other offer paid me twice as much, now.

EC: That's not bad.

CM: No, it's not bad. It caused me to realize that if Dr. Spinks, at the end of the school term, says, "Magee, I don't have anything for you to do," I'm out, but I wasn't making anything in the first place. Other job, I had the same opportunity to the same thing, but at least I made something, so I took a chance on doing that.

EC: Because the teachers didn't have any tenure.

CM: No. If he decided he didn't need you, and especially if you'd been involved. And of course, from that standpoint, I don't--we didn't suffer the wrath as some of the counties did, because of what we were doing. I knew we were crazy. There's one other thing that happened during this period, in 1962, I believe it was. Because of my activity, my wife and I were subpoenaed, along with one other black man, T.F. Bourne, to go to Aberdeen, Mississippi, to be witnesses that Clyde Kennard was still alive. He was in Parchman at the time. And I never shall forget it. We left here on the--I think it was late December, the twenty-first. [1:25:00] I don't think it was [19]62. Very cold. Theron Lynd was subpoenaed. I don't know. About three other--two other whites were subpoenaed, because they passed us on our way up. We got to Aberdeen. We went into the courthouse, and we sat, and they brought Clyde Kennard in from the side door

near the chamber. We waved at him. He waved at us. Just to be witness. Now, my wife and I questioned that, because we're teachers. Two teachers. We could see if one of us had been subpoenaed, and somebody wanted to take retribution against us, then the other would have a job, but both? We went, not knowing what would happen.

EC: Do you know--

CM: I know who subpoenaed me. Yeah. R. Jess Brown. Attorney R. Jess Brown did it. There were only two black attorneys that I knew of in the state, Jack Young and R. Jess Brown.

EC: Who was the--. I don't understand the purpose.

CM: Well, the government had ordered them, with a writ of habeas corpus, had ordered them to prove, show that he was still alive.

EC: I see, because of the--.

CM: Yeah, condition that he was in.

EC: It was part of the effort to try to get him out.

CM: Yeah.

EC: What did he look like at that time?

CM: He was real dark. Now I know that he was on chemo or something, but I mean, truly, real, real dark complexion.

EC: Did he look ill?

CM: Well, from a distance, we only just waved to him, and that's it, so--. That was it. We'd done our job, and now we'd come back to the city.

EC: Did you know him before he was arrested?

CM: I didn't. I didn't. I knew everything that he was involved in, but I had not personally met him.

EC: Did you know R. Jess Brown? Did you know him separate from this?

CM: Mm-hmm. I knew him from trials he and Jack Young had held here.

EC: So they knew you because of the voter registration cases, perhaps?

CM: I'm sure. I'm sure. I'm sure that's it.

EC: I never knew about that. I'd never heard about that, you know, going to witness that he was still living. Did you know Mr. Dahmer?

CM: I knew Mr. Dahmer, but I knew him primarily through his sons. Two of his sons were classmates with me at Alcorn, Vernon Jr. and Martin S. We called him "Little Dahmer." We called Vernon "Junior." Bo, that's what they called them. Martin S. we called "Little Dahmer." Sure, I remember them quite vividly before, while I was in school. Then when I came here, of course, they were in service, because they left school and volunteered for the service, and I stayed and finished my time out.

I didn't have the connection with him personally that others had, but one experience after he expired, and there's nobody else to verify this except for me. Several of us volunteered to just go up that way, park beside the highway, and just observe. Mr. Charles Phillip and myself drove up there together one night, shortly after they burned his house, and stood watch.

EC: Can you describe the community's reaction when they burned his house?

CM: A lot of sadness, of course. A lot of sadness. That was very close to home. There were groups--. A group. They called them "The Deacons"--not too many

people knew who they were--who were like watchmen, who kept watch for anything that's funny that's going on. The only other thing that happened to me--.

EC: Did the Deacons organize here after he was killed?

CM: I think it was after he was killed.

EC: I think so, too.

CM: The only other thing that happened to me that would claim my attention right now. Somebody sprayed chemical on my lawn in the form of a cross.

EC: Was that during this time? Do you know who did it?

CM: No.

EC: Did that worry you? [1:30:00]

CM: Not a whole lot, but I let my wife and babies sleep in the back room. I slept in the front room with a rifle.

EC: Did anybody else come help you keep watch, or did you just take care of it?

CM: I just took care of it myself.

EC: Were you here when they had the trials, the first trials, when they actually convicted a couple of the men?

CM: I was here for the first trials. One of the guys who was given some time was pardoned by Governor Waller, I believe.

EC: I think that's right.

CM: I wrote a letter to him, how terrible it was to pardon a man. I sent the letter to the editor. I sent him a copy, and I sent it to the editor. They did print it in the

paper. I was here when the last man was sentenced. I went to his trial. I'd heard all of that, see.

EC: Did you ever get a response from the governor?

CM: No, no.

EC: Nothing?

CM: I didn't get a--. As a matter of fact, I'm not surprised about that. But it was in the mail, it was in the news.

EC: Were you surprised that they were able to get the conviction in the late [19]60s?

CM: Not really. I guess you'd say yes and no. As they began to get others, then I figured at some point that everybody would be held accountable for the misdeeds they had done.

EC: Did the conviction of--now I'm blanking on his name--Sam Bowers.

CM: Sam Bowers?

EC: Yeah. How did it--do you have a sense of, did that impact the community when he was finally convicted?

CM: I don't know if there was a relief or not. It had been so long from the time of the crime to the time they convicted him. I was at that trial. They were--. Outside their immediate family, the younger people would not have had that much emotional attachment to it as the older people would have had to it at that time.

EC: What are some of the things that you would like people to know about the civil rights movement?

CM: The courage. The legacy that we have the courage to keep on keeping on in spite of the odds. To not let their opportunity of making things better pass them by. We have a lot of legacy, a lot of people who invested in what we now call freedom, and if we don't continue to invest in it, then what will our future generation have to inspire them to keep going?

I feel like for the young people today to hear it, is sort of like a fairy tale. That couldn't happen if--I was born since then. I've gone to school anywhere I wanted to go, lived basically where I wanted to live. That couldn't have happened, but it did happen. We miss telling the stories because it's not in the "history books." It was not in history books then, but we were history. People before us were history. My grandparents were history.

And of course, the older the grandparents get today, the less they get a chance to pass on to succeeding generations, because we warehouse them for convenience. If we work, we need to put them in the resting home, or if they're real, real sick, we just need to put them there. But when we came on, there was no rest home, no nursing home. We had an extended family, so we benefited from each other's experience. We were there to encourage each other, that there is a better way.

Many times I will say to people, "Three words will solve all the ills that are in this country. The first word is education. The second word is education. And by now you know the third word is--education." [1:35:00] There are a lot of smart people, but a lot of them not educated.

EC: You've spoken to this a little bit, and I think you just did, but you're a leader of the NAACP still today, so what is it that you think are the most significant issues that need to be addressed? I feel like I'm asking you the same question now, right?

CM: At the top of the list--.

EC: What is it?

CM: [Laughter] Education. [Laughter] Education, and what we're work--. Education, jobs, which would include employment. Education, jobs--. And the freedom to exercise whatever gifts and talents that you have without regards to your skin color.

We need to do some more with our community policing. We're working on the community policing. There is not a friendly dialogue between the police and the community. Police come from the same community, many of them, that they police, but there still is a breakdown in communication. So communication is very important. People need to be heard. People want to be heard. We had an experience back here that we resolved, but it's not satisfactory.

When the city council took away the citizen forum for ninety days, ended up keeping it for fifteen months. All kinds of suggestions to go back to it. They only went back when we took them to court. That was unnecessary.

We shut it down because people who have a problem communicating sometimes get very emotional, and they've got to get through their emotion before you can hear what they're trying to say. A lot of people come to me with problems. They don't know how to explain the problem, but I have a listening ear. I know how to ask the right question so that you can get it out, and sometimes that's all they need, is to know that somebody heard them. Then, now, we can work on a solution. But if you don't hear me,

you've got the baby's mentality. A baby can't talk. The only way they communicate is crying. And if you're smart enough, you figure out whether it's because I'm cold, because I'm wet, because I'm hungry, or because I've got some kind of pain. If you can figure it out, you can communicate, but if you never figure it out, when the baby can't get attention, it starts striking, fighting. Some of us become adults never being able to communicate.

EC: You were telling me before we got cut off about the group of black men that you worked with on housing.

CM: Yeah, the Hattiesburg Association for Civic Improvement. One of the members had gone to, I want to say Dallas, Texas, and he saw a similar project. He and his wife came back and sold the idea to us, and we made an application with HUD, and that bill, that plan, cost us $121 million to put up. We only put up like $3,000 to get it started, and that kind of stuff. Nobody earned any. Nobody got any money from it. Only people who were privileged to work there got paid, and I never worked there.

EC: So in some ways, it was an investment, but it was also an effort to provide housing and services?

CM: It was investment, not for individual profit--.

EC: But for the community.

CM: But for the community, to help people to advance. Now, all of the others were put up by private owners for investment. Eventually we had to get rid of it, because Katrina didn't help us out, the insurance didn't pay all the damage then, and then long-term residents, when they moved out, there was so much renovation needed to be done, we had to drain our reserve. We were not making inspection, so we had to get rid of it.

But the other thing that came out of that is that the first community action agency here was started by this one group. We sent two people--.

EC: This was part of the War on Poverty?

CM: No.

EC: Community action?

CM: Community action agency.

EC: Okay.

CM: For Head Start.

EC: Oh, okay.

CM: Head Start. Head Start, yeah. We sent two people to Atlanta to find out [1:40:00] what it was about, and they came back, and we formed a biracial committee, and put the application in to learn that Judge Pittman, who was Senator Pittman at that time, had put one together. It had to be biracial. We took it to Washington, ready to walk it through, so when they start contacting those who they say they had on it, they knew nothing about it.

EC: [Laughs] They just put people's names on it?

CM: Yeah. So they came back here and said, "You all tear yours up. Sign onto ours, and we'll walk it through." And we said, "No, no."

EC: They didn't know who they were talking to.

CM: We are responsible for getting the Forrest-Stone Community Action Agency. Just recently it was known for what pays Head Start, and because they had some problems down there, they're under new management now, but that's a part of what came out of the Freedom Summer and the Civil Rights Movement, trying to--. You

know, these are our markers that, yeah, we progressed. The school is the other--. The schools are still struggling, but we know these happen. So we--. At my age, I'm still trying to get a community-wide unity, police-community kind of thing. That's in the process. But we're supposed to be talking about history. I know that, but--.

EC: Well, no, we're actually--we're interested in the continuities. We're interested in legacies.

CM: So we're still trying to build a community relationship. White, black, ministers, clergy, judges, policemen, presidents of the universities, and we think we're making a good start with it.

EC: So that was--. You know, we're here in the McCain Library today, and President McCain was here, was part of keeping Southern segregation. What kind of changes have you seen with the universities?

CM: A tremendous change with the, you know, the population, the demographics of the population, is just tremendous. Of course, you've got an African-American president, and we've got that closeness. I had close contact before he came here, but it grew out of other things. President--who was just before him? It was a lady, and I didn't have that much contact with her. I maybe had only one meeting with her. But before him, [Shelby F.] Thames.

EC: Okay, yeah, I remember that name.

CM: I had some relationship here that grew out of a football game between Jackson State and USM, where there was some altercation between some people. We brought that to his attention. We had a lot of back-and-forth involvement there. And of course, since that time, now I still have a good relationship with Dr. Eddie Holloway and

other persons that are here. I get calls from all over. A couple incidents that stand out in my mind.

One has to do with a student from Kansas City, Kansas. He was on the basketball team, a good player. He and his roommate got into an altercation. He got his jaw broken. The coach didn't report it, and when he reported--. And he and the doctor agreed that one thing happened, but the film shows something else happened. The mother came down intending to take her son out of this school. He was a good player. He initially agreed, but then he said, "Mom, the basketball team is going to be good this year, so I'm going to stay and play," but, now, daddy didn't have that same spirit, so they had to deal with him.

The other had to do with a family from Illinois who had a daughter down here, who had a roommate of a different race. They had some problems, so I was called in on that, and got that resolved. I think we are making a difference. There is a difference on the campus.

EC: Does it feel like it belongs to the community more?

CM: The campus makes a special effort to reach out to the community, celebrating Freedom Summer, celebrating other things like that, and trying to get the community involved. The community is reaching out to them, so I do see some progress. We are in a unique situation, that we have not had a Ferguson here, and that's one of the reasons why the late [1:45:00] effort was done, starting from the NAACP, that we want to spare this city from a Ferguson.

That was a tragedy. It was just the flip-flop of what we were trying to prevent. And no tragedy is good, but the thing that kept us focused there, that it was a black

officer and a white officer, so we couldn't do finger pointing. The only thing we can get here is try to bring people together, because both shed blood in the same soil, and the blood happened to be red. It just happened to be one officer of color and the other white. That's one--. That's what I call being proactive.

I live in the community. I live in a neighborhood. I know a lot of people. A lot of people know me. There's still a lot of problems, a lot craziness, people getting killed, people getting robbed and all that kind of stuff, but it's not going to go away by itself. The community has a big stake in it, to say whether it continues or discontinues. So that's one way to thresh this.

EC: So are there other--? You've talked about a number of the legacies and a number of the things that you're still working on. Are there other things that are important for people to know about either the struggle or the work that you've done since?

CM: Well, this--what I'm going to state now--it does not leave me with a bitterness, but I had a great-uncle who was lynched here on Richburg Road, like in 1929. My great-uncle was lynched.

EC: What's the name of the road?

CM: Huh?

EC: I don't know the area that well. What was the name of the road?

CM: Richburg Road.

EC: Richburg Road. So is that right here, in this--?

CM: No, that's going out toward--you know where the Pine Belt complex is down here, off of Broad Street? If I went down 49 and turned just as I passed Walmart

going back in that direction, which is Old Highway 11. Turn off of there onto Richburg Road, back in that way. And no one was ever brought to trial.

EC: Did you know about that as a young man, or as a child?

CM: Not as a child, I didn't know that. It was after I moved here to this area here that I learned about--that my family had spent part of--.

EC: How did you learn about it?

CM: I'm trying to remember. How did I first learn about it? I don't know if somebody approached me and informed me about it, and then of course there's newspaper clippings and all that kind of stuff.

EC: So you researched it?

CM: Yeah, I did.

EC: Do you know who was involved in it?

CM: Nobody. Well, there's some ideas of who were involved, but nobody was ever brought to court.

EC: Has there been any effort in this area to deal with lynchings, to acknowledge or try to do any kind of--?

CM: I talked to one person who was going into some deep research on it, and I don't know--and I do have some notes on it, but I can't put it together right now.

EC: Because I know a few communities--not many--are trying to do this restorative justice, you know? That must have--what was it like to find out that your family member had been lynched?

CM: It's like, "It was them. It could have been me." I've been in places where there's no protection, out in the open, boondocks, you see the space. You don't know what kind of reaction you're going to get. You just never know.

EC: Yeah.

CM: You just never know who's going to do something crazy.

EC: Yeah. Did you find out about that--has that been recently, or was that when you moved to the area?

CM: No, this--. I've known about this now ten, fifteen years or more.

EC: Yeah, yeah. Do you have any other thoughts you want to share?

CM: I can't think of any other right now.

EC: Well, we really appreciate you coming in [1:50:00] and sharing your experiences and thoughts with us.

CM: Well, I am honored to be alive, that I can still talk about it. [Laughs]

EC: Yeah, and not just alive, right? Still working, still contributing.

CM: Oh my.

Female 1: This has been a presentation of the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture.

END OF RECORDING

Transcribed by Audio Transcription Center, March 22, 2017