

Interview of Governor William Winter by April Grayson, camera by Kate Medley

April Grayson: —saying formally that this is April Grayson and Kate Medley interviewing Governor William Winter on October 23, 2006, on the campus of the University of Mississippi.

So, Governor Winter, I wondered if you could give us a sense of what life was like in segregated, Jim Crow Mississippi, and what people like Aaron Shirley had to go up against, and Reuben Anderson, people like that, had to go up against when trying to go to professional school, or to go to higher—all-white higher education in Mississippi.

William Winter: Well, the whole process of desegregation in Mississippi was a long, difficult road, as you know. And the forces of massive resistance, those who were threatened by any change whatever in the racial status quo, dominated the state of Mississippi in our thinking, in our relationships, and certainly in our politics. It was almost impossible to express even the most, the most subtle reference to desegregation, as if that were, as if that would unleash all the forces that would destroy our Southern way of life. So it took some very courageous and brave men and women to breach that wall, and among them, of course, were people like Dr. Aaron Shirley, and Dr. Aaron Henry, and obviously Medgar Evers, who instilled in African Americans, in many African Americans, an understanding that it was going, it was going to require some very, very difficult confrontations with the white power establishment. (02:00)

It was in this context, of course, that some of those early confrontations did take place, and which now have led to the much, much more satisfactory quality of life that we all enjoy. I said, I said to Medgar—I said to Mrs. Medgar Evers one time—Myrlie Evers—at a dinner that we held in, at, at the Governor's Mansion when I was governor, that we white folks were prisoners of a terrible system of discrimination and segregation, that we were not free to take the positions that many white people in Mississippi would like to have taken because of the intimidation that we felt. And so, people like Medgar Evers helped free us, as well as black people. (02:51)

AG: I'm going to pause just a minute and close the door. I forgot to do that.

(KM and AG discuss audio issue with the video camera.)

AG: (03:22) So could you give us a little background on the real contentious issue of segregation which happened with people like James Meredith and Clyde Kinnard, things like that, and then perhaps contrast that with, by the time Aaron Shirley and Reuben Anderson and these people were able to more quietly come into the law school and the medical school. If you could tell us a little bit about the men who came before them and why you think it was a different experience for them by the time they integrated those schools.

WW: (04:03) Well, the very, the very harsh confrontations by the time, by the middle, by the middle 1960s—really, really after James Meredith was admitted to Ole Miss after the riot in October of 1962. The confrontations were less intense after that period. There was a recognition, I think, not, not altogether accepted in the white community, but there was a recognition that we could not continue with a position of total resistance to desegregation and that there was, there was beginning to take place the inevitable desegregation of the universities and the, and the public schools in the state, and the, and the other public institutions. So, by the middle 60s, when Reuben Anderson and, and, and his contemporaries arrived at Ole Miss, the, the, the, the structure of desegregation had, had, had been finally put in place. But this is not to say that it was, it was easy, and I've talked to Judge Anderson about those experiences, and he was greeted—he was still greeted with a great deal of hostility and without much acceptance, even, even several *years* after James Meredith had been admitted in 1962. (05:48)

AG: Could you talk about—you were a law student here, and did you know Joshua Morse as a student? Could you sort of place yourself and him, him chronologically and talk about any kind of relationship you might have had or any personal knowledge you had about him?

WW: (06:13) Well, Josh Morse and I were close personal friends. We, we came as freshman together, to Ole Miss, in the fall of 1940, and so we were undergraduate students as well as later students in the law school. World War II intervened, of course, and took us both into the military, and we were reunited at Ole Miss after the war in 1946. We were not in the same class in law school, but we were, we were in law school together. My early associations with him continued during our law school days and continued after we both graduated from law school and were members of the Bar. And where, when I would go to Poplarville in my political campaigns, I found in Josh Morse a supporter and a warm friend. So I had a very close personal relationship with him for a long time before he became the dean of the law school at Ole Miss. (07:15)

AG: What was he like? Did you see signs of his leadership then, and could you tell me more about him personally?

WW: He, obviously he was very bright. He had strong opinions, expressed those opinions, but did it in a way that I think contributed to his ability to cause other to, to respond to his leadership. He was a strong leader, he was an excellent lawyer. He knew how to communicate, and he understood the traditions of Mississippi. He was not as if, it was not as if some outsider had come in to suggest that we needed to make changes at the law school and, and otherwise. He was a native son of Pearl River County—that's about as Southern as you can get. And because he did have that background, I think he was able to accomplish more than someone who might not have understood as well or have, have had, had the associations that he had had with the people of Mississippi. (08:28)

AG: So did you continue to keep in touch with him even when he was dean at the law school and do, do you have any personal knowledge of kind of what he went

through in his process with the integration and the fallout for him personally afterwards?

WW: I think that Josh Morse understood that the time had come in Mississippi to present a more progressive face to the rest of the country. And he felt that the law school was perhaps in the best position to present that by virtue of their training and background. Most, most lawyers emerge as leaders in their community, not just in the profession but in the community as a whole. Josh Morse felt that it was important that we develop a cadre of young, progressive leaders in Mississippi, who would not only accept but would embrace changes that would bring about a better quality of life for people in this state, for black people as well as white people. And he did that, he set that, he set that model in the law school, and while there were, there were many who were opposed to his ideas, I think he did achieve great success in creating a, a, a whole body of, of new opinions about how lawyers perform, what their responsibility was to their profession and to the maintenance of law and order, in creating respect for the law. If lawyers—Josh Morse felt that if lawyers did not have respect for the law, how could other people expect, be expected to have respect for the law, so he was intent on creating an understanding, a very responsible understanding, of the role of lawyers in elevating the sights of the people of Mississippi and recognizing that the changes that were taking place, in terms of race relations, would inevitably, inevitably create a better society for all of us. (10:58)

AG: Did he ever talk to you about where that basis came from, like his family or any influences that shaped his way of thinking about that?

WW: Well, like all of us who grew up in Mississippi, in the, in the, in the 30s, in the 20s and 30s and 40s, we were products of that time, and I'm sure that Josh Morse, as I was, accepted segregation as a way of life. We did not, we did not give a lot of thought, frankly, to it, other than it was a system that we'd inherited, but as we had other experiences, life experiences, particularly in the military during World War II, I think we understood that this was a system that could not, could not be sustained—should not be sustained. It was out of those, those broadening experiences that came from our going overseas in World War II, being associated with people of different backgrounds, different cultures, different races, that we recognized when we got home that things would be different. And that it was our responsibility to try to shape this new Mississippi in a way that would provide a, a better society for everyone. (12:22)

AG: One thing that John Batson talked about when we interviewed him was that these were two families that were more known for their progressive ideas or not as, you know, not as tow-the-line kind of thinking in their area. But it was an area that was very, was Bilbo country, I guess, and I was wondering if you could give us a little bit of context about Bilbo and his ideas and his influence in the state.

WW: Well, Senator Bilbo was a native of Pearl River County, of course, and throughout his political career, the issue of race dominated politics in Mississippi. He understood, I think, that one way, one way to succeed in Mississippi politics was to, was to play to the emotions of the people, and he did that very successfully. He was elected governor twice,

as you know, elected United States Senator three times. But those of us who were growing up during the later Bilbo years found in him a, a, an attitude that we did not think served the best interests of the state and that could not be defended. I know when I was in the Army in World War II, and Bilbo, Senator Bilbo, was United States Senator from Mississippi, making, making very, very severe racist statements, I was, I was, I was made to try to defend my state, in, in, as, as a result of Bilbo's, Bilbo's attitudes. And it was not a pleasant task. And obviously the United States Senate came to that conclusion, after he was reelected in 1946 for a third term, the Senate refused to seat him and den—and denied him his seat even though they permitted him to return to Mississippi and draw his salary. But it was, he was not, particularly in his later years, he was not a good representative of our state. In his early years, he had been a fairly progressive governor, at a time when race was not the dominating force in politics. (15:10)

AG: Let's move to Dr. Batson, and I was wondering if you could tell me sort of personal experiences or what you know about him and, and both as a person and at the medical school.

WW: Well, again, Dr. Blair Batson was a close personal friend. He was my next-door neighbor in Jackson for a number of years. And he and I used to stand in the driveway of his home or my home and talk about subjects of common interests and reflect on the needs of the state, particularly the healthcare needs of the state. It was a time of transition in the state—this was in the, when I, when he and I were neighbors were, was in the middle 1970s—and I found in him a very discerning, wise, compassionate person who epitomized the, the very highest quality of leadership in the medical profession, who had a great concern for his fellow human beings and who wanted to alleviate their, their medical, their physical problems to the extent that he was able to do that, with particular reference to children. He was committed to, to the healthcare of children in our state and having grown up in Pearl River County, he saw how many poor children were denied basic elementary health care and how many children were, were, were, were unable to survive their childhood. So Dr. Blair Batson was, was one of, one of my heroes from, from many standpoints. (16:58)

AG: Do you have any personal anecdotes that you want to share about him, or anything you can think of?

WW: Well, we both, I think, shared a similar social and political philosophy that—we, we had both grown up in rural Mississippi, we both understood the, the lack of understanding of a great many of, of the people of the state with the, with the, with the conditions we were confronted with in Mississippi. We both, I think, wanted to see Mississippi raise its sights in terms of how life could be improved for people. As far as having any specific anecdotes about, about him other than having really leaned across the fence between our homes and talked about our hopes and aspirations for the state, I remember those as very pleasant experiences, and I learned so much from him. I was inspired by him. I found in him the kind of, the kind of citizen leader that I thought the state needed to have more of. (18:21)

AG: Ok, great. So can you speak more generally about this idea of the, the kinds of people like the mothers of Blair Batson and Josh Morse that they credit with instilling—and the parents, basically—instilling in them this idea of fairness and equality. Can you comment on those sort of unknown people in Mississippi that you think contributed to making it a better place?

WW: I did not know either of those wonderful ladies—I, I know I knew of them by reputation, and I would judge them on the basis of the children that they, that they reared. Obviously both Josh Morse and Blair Batson inherited some special values from their parents and their moth—particularly from their mothers, who imbued them with the kind of understanding of human kindness and of compassion and of the need to serve, to serve other people. They were not—and they were not unusual either. There were, there were so many women in Mississippi who are the unsung heroes of that period, who created in their children idea about how they could be better citizens. So Mrs. Morse and Mrs. Batson represented a, a, a, a whole class of wonderful women who produced some wonderful children. (20:09)

AG: Let's pause for just a minute, if you don't mind. (CAMERA PAUSED)

(20:15 CAMERA STARTED AGAIN)

AG: Ok, so, Governor Winter, could you tell us a little bit about Cleve McDowell and what you knew of him and his history in this state?

WW: I knew Cleve McDowell later, after, after he came to Ole Miss, when he was working in the Delta in one of the, one of the nonprofit organizations over there. My association with him was fairly limited, but I, I did, I did have a number of conversations with him. I had a high regard for him and felt that, that he was providing good leadership in the Delta. His untimely, early death, of course, ended a career of service that he was beginning, I think, to find himself comfortable in. (21:09)

AG: Could you tell us a little bit about his time here and, just for the record, in terms of what happened with his time here?

WW: I'm, I'm a little vague on it. As I remember Cleve was admitted to the law school and unfortunately was—and I'm, I'm vague on this—as I remember he was found with, with a pistol and was expelled from school as a result of having that weapon. (21:36)

Kate Medley: And then do you remember, or do you know much about the reaction that Mr. Morse had to, I mean, had to deal with from the university, from the law school, from the state legislature. He's talked a little bit about that.

WW: (nodding) Well, it would be, it would be, I think, an accurate statement to say that Josh Morse did not mind taking on controversy, and he brought to the law school a number of professors who were considered to be liberal, however that word is defined, and who created for him and for the law school for a time some political problems. Most,

most of us, I think, in the legal profession at that time understood what he was doing and understand—understood his need to broaden the base of, of the law school, of the faculty at the law school. He had some, some great teachers here—Walter Dellinger, for, for example, was, became a, who is now a national legal figure, was one of those young teachers that he brought in. But that did not suit, sit well with some of the old guard legislators and politicians, and it cost, it cost Josh some problems here. But the impact, the overall impact of Josh Morse's leadership at the law school, I think, was a very valuable and permanent one that enhanced the reputation of the law school, even though it was, it, it created some controversy at the time. (23:31)

AG: I also wanted to ask you, sort of shifting gears a little bit, Susan [Glisson, the Winter Institute executive director] and I are thinking about doing a project on the Sovereignty Commission and sort of its legacy in the state. And so I want to shift away from this project and ask you just a couple of questions about the history of the Sovereignty Commission in the state, and if you could tell me sort of what its role and its impact in the state during the, I guess, late 50s, 60s, was. And kind of describe what it was.

WW: Yes. I was a member of the Legislature when the Sovereignty Commission was proposed by Governor Coleman in 1956. It was presented to us as a public relations initiative that would seek to present Mississippi in a better light to the rest of the country, that we would send out representatives of the state who would address the progress that the state was making, and we would bring to the state representatives of the media who would hopefully find here a, a, a good quality of life. That was somewhat romantic thinking, obviously. But the concept was not, initially was, was not that of being an investigative agency. When the bill was presented to the Legislature, it was passed in the House of Representatives almost unanimously—I think there were only two votes against it. There were some of us, however, who read the fine print in that bill, and who saw the possibility, under different leadership, for the, for the agency to be a real, a real problem, to, to, to free speech and to, and to a democratic society. So we held it on a motion to reconsider, talked about it, and when the motion to reconsider was called up, there were some 30 or 40 of us who voted to reconsider it, in effect voted against the bill. However, it passed—it was not reconsidered, it was passed. And then I continued to have a lot of reservations about it, and when the Appropriations bill came up to fund it, there were a considerable number of us who voted not to fund the appropriation. So that was the beginning of it, under the, under the Coleman administration. And there were, there were put in place administrators of the, of the commission—Hal Decell, a very fine newspaper editor from Rolling Fork was, was on the staff of the Commission. And I think it was run responsibly, as a public relations agency. But then the White Citizens' Council got hold of it under the Barnett administration and, and turned it into a little Gestapo, a little spy agency that created a great deal of controversy and did not reflect favorably on the people of Mississippi. And as a result, the Sovereignty Commission, during those years where it was actually subsidizing the White Citizens' Council, did great damage to the state, was one of the forces behind the, the events leading to the Meredith, the Meredith fiasco here at Ole Miss. So under that regime it was not, it was not a credit to the state and obviously it, its usefulness, if it ever had any usefulness, was ended. (27:41)

AG: What kind of direct—what did they actually do as an investigative unit?

WW: With what?

AG: With the information—they collected information and could you just, for the record, I guess, explain briefly who they targeted and what kind of information they collected.

WW: Well, the information they were looking for, of course, was, had to do with those who were promoting desegregation in the state. And they kept a tab on people that they thought, that they identified as being “integrationists,” particularly those who came into the state from outside, as well as the civil rights leaders within the state, and anybody else that crossed the line that they suspected of being soft on, on segregation. So they had numerous files on hundreds of people that were involved either directly or peripherally in the Civil Rights movement, and many that were not. It was a, it was a, it was a scary sort of thing that a state agency such as the Sovereignty Commission had such a wide range of authority, countenance by state government, funded by state government, working hand-in-hand with the White Citizens’ Council, at a time when Mississippi was, was undergoing the trauma of change in race relations. The result was to make much more difficult the transition in an orderly way to the kind of good biracial society that, that we, we eventually were able to achieve. (29:30)

AG: Could you comment on Erle Johnson, who I know was head of the Sovereignty Commission at one point and then wrote books about it and has been interviewed talking about the contention within the organization and with the Citizens’ Councils. Could you just share a little bit about him?

WW: Again, Erle Johnson was a friend of mine. He was a nat—he was a product of Grenada, Mississippi, my hometown. And I had, I had longtime associations with Erle, and I had a high regard for him. Erle Johnson, I always thought, was one who really wanted to maintain a, a more responsible range of activity on the part of the Sovereignty Commission—got into trouble with Governor Barnett, got into trouble with the White Citizens’ Council over what they perceived to be his, his too moderate views. But I think Erle Johnson’s heart was in the right place. He was trying to defend the indefensible, which made it, made it a very difficult role for him as the director of this, of this organization committed to maintaining segregation at all costs, to follow a responsible path. I was present in Grenada when he spoke at the high school graduation, in the, in the spring of 1962, a few months before the Meredith affair. And where Erle Johnson in effect called for a, a reassessment of our position on, on, on desegregation and said that it was go—it was inevitable that we were going to have to make adjustments in our, in our position. For that, he was castigated by the White Citizens’ Council, was called up by the Governor and threatened with being dismissed and only by creating a, the assurances that he would not, he would not weaken on that, on that issue, he was retained in that position. But it was, it was obvious to me that throughout his, his career as director of the Sovereignty Commission that he was not, he was not in tune with the harsh investigative

procedures that the Sovereignty Commission followed. But he was, he was as so many others were at the time, prisoners of a system that would not let him take a more moderate position. (32:44)

AG: Ok, and just one last question. Do you see a legacy of the Sovereignty Commission and its role in Mississippi? Do you think that we're still dealing with some of the things that, that living under that kind of state-orchestrated investigative de facto spy agency—do you think that we're still sort of dealing with the issues from that time?

WW: Well, it created scars that I think still haunt us. I think there is a, I think there is a guilt, I think there is a feeling of guilt on the part of a lot of people of that generation about what happened then. Whether that legacy still affects our thinking on the issue of race, I, I, I cannot say. What I think it, what I think it has done for most, for most Mississippians, what I hope it has done, has been to create a revulsion about those processes, so great that we will nev—never let ourselves slip back into that sort of, of racist mentality that created so many problems for us at the time and which we are still living to undo. But the Sovereignty Commission was, and the way it was administered for a number of years, represents a dark, dark stain on past, and, and that's why it is important that we understand what went on in those years. That's why the history of those years is, is so important, that's why the Civil Rights Education Commission that we're working on now is so important, that a, that a new generation of people in this state, particularly the young people coming along now, understand what did take place in those years. And if they understand that, I think they will have a, a, a, a, a greater reason to resist any efforts that diminish our freedom or, or, or diminish the freedom of any single individual. None of us is really free as long as, as, any, any, any single citizen of this state is, is, is not free. So it is a responsibility that all of us bear to create a soci—a society that is as free as racism as, as free of discrimination, as free of inequity as we possibly can. That is perhaps an impossible goal, but it is one we must continue to work to achieve.

AG: Ok, great. Thank you very much. (To KM) Can you think of anything else?

WW: Thank you.

AG: Thank you very much!

WW: I hope you—

END INTERVIEW. (35:21)