

**MARGARET WALKER ALEXANDER NATIONAL RESEARCH CENTER
JACKSON STATE UNIVERSITY**

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

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I, Walter Brown, have voluntarily given an interview on and in view of the historical and scholarly value of this information. I knowingly and voluntarily permit Jackson State University, the full use of this information. I hereby grant and assign all my rights of every kind whatever pertaining to this information, whether or such rights are now known, recognized, or contemplated, to Jackson State University, Jackson, Mississippi.

Walter Brown

Interviewee's Signature

2-23-06

Date of Interview

Emanuel J. Alston

Interviewer's Signature

JACKSON STATE UNIVERSITY
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THE ROBERT CLARK ERA ORAL HISTORY PROJECT O.H. 06.01

INTERVIEWEE: ATTORNEY WALTER BROWN
INTERVIEWER: DR. EMANUEL J. ABSTON
SUBJECT: THE ROBERT CLARK ERA IN MISSISSIPPI POLITICS
DATE: FEBRUARY 23, 2006

ABSTON: This is an interview with Attorney Walter Brown for the Jackson State University Robert Clark Era Oral History Project by Emanuel J. Abston. He is in his office in Natchez, Mississippi and the time is 4:10 p.m. Good afternoon Attorney Brown.

BROWN: Hello and welcome to Natchez.

ABSTON: Thanks, I'm glad to be here.
For the record, please state your full name and home address.

BROWN: John Walter Brown, Jr. 523 South Union Street, Natchez, MS.

ABSTON: Have you always lived in Natchez? And in Adams County?

BROWN: Born and raised here, Yes sir, Yes sir.

ABSTON: Early in life did you prepare yourself for a career?

BROWN: I did, I did, but it wasn't early. I left high school here in Natchez, and went into service for 2 years; came out of the service decided to go to school and take pre-law to become a lawyer. I have had some experience in politics because my father was a county supervisor for sixteen years and I had worked as a Kennedy intern for Congressmen John Bell Williams.

ABSTON: Very interesting-when did you become interested in the Mississippi Legislature?

BROWN: A lot of young lawyers that come out of law school because they do not have a lot of anything else to do they run for public office. I graduated in 1965, from Ole Miss Law School, came back to Natchez in 1967, and decided I wanted to run for the Mississippi Legislature.

- ABSTON: What years were you in the state legislature?
- BROWN: I served from 1968 until 1980.
- ABSTON: What type of district did you represent?
- BROWN: At that point in time, this was before you had single member districts. I served in Adams County with my colleague, who was Speaker John Junkin we had just Adams County.
- ABSTON: That name rings a bell, let me back up and just ask who was the president pro tempore of the senate? Do you recall who it was?
- BROWN: During my tenure it was Senator Marion Smith who was also from Natchez, so we were blessed to have the speaker of the house and The president pro tempore from Adams County.
- ABSTON: Who was the pro tempore of the House?
- BROWN: We had no speaker pro tempore until 1974, so it was half way during my tenure that we actually created the office of permanent speaker pro tempore. And that was when Mr. Junkin became ill in 1974 and the House decided to create a speaker pro tempore because of his illness and his absences. Later, Buddie Newman from Issaquena county was elected as speaker pro tempore.
- ABSTON: So how many years did Mr. Newman serve there?
- BROWN: He was elected speaker pro tempore in 1974 and Mr. Junkin passed away in 1975. At that point in time Buddie Newman became speaker, and he served as speaker until 1988.
- ABSTON: Do you recall when you first met Robert Clark?
- BROWN: I met Robert on the first day of the legislation session, when that first Tuesday was, following the first Monday in January. Early January of 1968, was the first time I met Robert, and was the first time we actually connected.
- ABSTON: Do you have any personal experiences with Robert Clark you would like to share?
- BROWN: Robert first came to the legislature, keeping in mind he was elected in 1967, and he endured a good deal of solitude there weren't many legislators that would socialize or fraternize with Robert which was quite

unusual because of the camaraderie in the Mississippi legislature----- the folks would become very, very close friends sort of like being in the military service, people that you become acquainted with and that was unusual for Robert not to have that relationship for a few months, seated in the front, where I think he sat the entire time he was there. I never liked sitting in the front because you couldn't see the dynamics of the house. He sat in the front so when you walk in the door Robert was the first person you saw; sitting next to him was the speakers' chair and of course the speaker was always presiding, and for that reason Robert would be sitting alone, for a long time, especially when the speaker was actually not occupying the chair next to him. After a few days, a few weeks, of course mostly younger members of the house were elected under different terms than old ones, and as always back in those days 30 – 40 new legislators were elected every four years, I don't think they have quite that turn around now like they used to, mostly younger members of the house were a friend of Robert, keep in mind this is 1968, in that context, I became a good friends of Robert.

ABSTON: Now, can you recall some of the earliest bills he actually introduced?

BROWN: Robert's interest, at best that I can recall was in education. A bedrock of his interest, was game and fishing. I'm sort of a city boy, I don't do a lot of hunting and fishing. Not like most people, I would have to depend on Robert to explain things to me, and get a straight answer. One of the first bills we introduced was out on the gulf coast, one of those gulf shore islands and I recall that was one of the first bills to hit the floor, and I recall the debate went on for hours, about that particular subject. Mainly because so many folks excluding people like me were so knowledgeable about it that everybody wanted to speak on it. I don't think Robert spoke actually for several months. When he did speak, he normally would get up on educational bills and like a lot of the good ole' boys of Mississippi, he would get and start talking about dogs going through the woods and he was an expert at that.

ABSTON: What was the nature of the bills- was it to increase the licensing fees or create an agency to regulate hunting, something of that orientation?

BROWN: He would get involved in that; keep in mind, Robert was the only black member of the legislature for eight years. He had the election of '67 he had the election of '71 no blacks were elected back then until 76. A good friend of mine became judge, Rev. Horace Buckley and supervisor Doug Anderson were elected to the House. They were elected in the '75 election. They were very good members, and Robert was so singled out as one of the first and only black member of the legislature. Hillman Frazier got elected later and this is an interesting story. The group I was surrounded with included Jerry O'Keefe, Gerald Blessey, Jim

Sumner, Ed Perry, Lonnie Smith and like all the freshman legislators, we tend to take the license to do as we can to keep that nucleus there. I recall when Buddie became speaker pro tempore about 1976, he came to me and said. We need to hire some black staff. We don't have any black staff, we don't have a secretary, we don't have a counselor over committees. What do you think we should do? I said Buddie, go to the institutions of higher learning; inquire about who do you have out there that might want to come and work at the legislature. I told Robert about it, and I began talking about it to Hillman Frazier, so in a way you might say that Hillman is my protégé. I recommended to the speaker that he be hired. He was hired and he worked in our drafting office probably from 76 to about 80. I'm not sure when he ran for the Senate. Maybe in 80, maybe in 84, but he has been a wise choice. Robert also directed me where to look.

ABSTON: So, when Frazier got his foot in the door, he sort of recommended some others with Jackson State credentials, or was he broad and recruited and recommended others?

BROWN: He made some recommendations, I recall there was a couple other clerical administrative people that came in time, not legal, not instructors—it was a beginning and was a good beginning—black secretaries, white assistants---he and I and Robert had brought this about.

ABSTON: Attorney Brown, would you concede that Robert Clark had a legislative agenda that was ultimately adopted by the executive leadership?

BROWN: Robert's rise to power was very gradual. Robert was a very patient person, and I think Robert was a very wise man. Junkin to Newman in the mid 70s, that was a big change because Mr. Newman was his office attendant. Sonny Meredith, John Pearson, Bill Wilkerson were very progressive and came from counties like me that had a 40-50% black population and to some extent were elected like me, protected like me, because of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. I defeated an incumbent primarily because the blacks supported me. So, Robert watched all that and watched particularly those who were rising in authority in the house and begin to collaborate and guess. Robert's breaking out moment was 1974. The Speaker Mr. Junkin was reluctant to recognize one person for fear of offending somebody else. Others of us felt like we had to have somebody permanent in that position. Otherwise, the house for better or for worse with a strong speaker could get legislation passed. Robert, as I recalled, back in those days he signed for the selection of a new speaker. We were down on the first floor in the Ways and Means Committee, when Sonny Meredith and Butch Lambert, secured and strategized that we must make this a permanent position. Robert came in and different people were coming in and signing up. There were 122 members in the House, and you got to have the majority half plus one. And when Robert walked in there the next line was number 62

which mean you were over the top. We asked Robert, those of us who was trying to get this together; we need you to sign up and he signed up, not just because of Buddie, because Buddie still in a way was very much of the old guard, although he changed dramatically. He got to the Greenwood district and I think he was put in there to see that he would never come back. Buddie went to Greenwood took a left, and Robert said I want to sign the petition. He was the 62nd person to sign and that was ironic how things happened. Buddie had a bad image to those of us who were younger. I was at Ole Miss.... A lot of us who came to the legislature didn't really like him. But, Buddie was so personable and had such good leadership skills. Robert knew that and signed as number 62, eventually making Buddie Speaker and eventually Speaker of the House; that was a pivotal part of Buddie's life. Buddie had come from a totally different county even though his county Issaquena there were no black voters until 1965. I think from that moment on, I don't think that he was accepted before; Robert became the sweetest guy in the world. But he was, at that point, first recognized in 1974 and then began to be taken on board for leadership and his ideas began to be more and more accepted. He became more eager and more comfortable to explain those views, whereas before he was a young man not striving, not angry but very resonant and I think that changed the district.

ABSTON: Let me go down a list of things and get your comments. At the outset, was compulsory school attendance really popular in the early 70s?

BROWN: It was popular with those who got elected like in the late sixties early 70s, but there was still enough folks in the late 60s and early 70s that ---you can see buzz words like education codes, public radio, compulsory school, public kindergarten, open meetings. The majority of the House and the Senate too, still resisted those kinds of things, Robert joined a group of us that espoused on those things. Buddie Newman understood that these people would soon become his lieutenants. People like myself four, five, six, seven years in the service would shape the future.

ABSTON: And would get re-elected, for sure....

BROWN: Buddie's district was still Issaquena, Sharkey and Washington, which was probably a 45-50% district, and you know Washington County was a liberal county, all those kind of things is why we end up passing such legislation. I remember when we passed education television and public radio in 1969---we finally got on the air. It had been passed earlier, but never implemented---people like Robert, Jerry O'Keefe, Jim Sumner, Ed Perry, Gerald Blessey and Lonnie Smith, those kind of folks were beginning to express themselves and rightfully so they had paid their dues and started out as freshmen---and Robert was very much a part of it. It took us several years to pass educational television. When we brought out

the bill for public radio, on which everybody listens to now, everyday, and especially in the morning. I remember 11 members of that committee and the Chairman wouldn't have the bill on the floor. Ed Perry and I handled the bill on the floor, we had help from Robert and we passed it ----but all those were issues. Robert would walk up to you and say you know this is right and I would say I know it Robert. But, there is a way we can pass it!

ABSTON: Let me ask about increased salaries for teachers in that same time-frame. Was it pretty much a 1% or was it just what the state legislature decided at the end of the session?

BROWN: Teacher pay raises usually came like when John Bell Williams in 1966 promised a \$1,000 year teacher pay raise at the end of the session, and it was passed that year. Usually those kinds of things occurred early. The state was really changing in the early 70s. Schools begin to integrate; there was a great resistance beginning about 1974-75. Funding education to some extent and demographics were probably not good, in the sense that, it was hard to get folks galvanized. There was resistance by those who felt strongly about it. Robert was Vice-Chairman, George Rogers of Vicksburg was Chairman of Education. George was a Rhodes Scholar; was in counter intelligence in World War II, he taught Robert, and he later used Robert. George Rogers would later call back from Washington. Robert eventually became Chairman of Education and I think he learned a lot under George—he was a bright guy, bashful and knew in order to rise, you rise everybody. In the case of economics, although I had never talked to Robert about that, I suspect that George's influence and his tutoring made Robert successful as chair.

ABSTON: Let me shift on to higher education. Do you recall the years when Clark introduced the appropriation bills to upgrade historically black colleges?

BROWN: Those of us who came from areas where Alcorn, Valley, and particularly Alcorn and Jackson State knew everything in the Delta they kept to themselves. Walter Washington was at Alcorn one year and Walter and I became very good friends. He was probably the most reliable person I have ever talked to about higher education. As you know, credibility with the legislature was the strengthening point. If people trust you, they believe you. Walter was that kind of guy; he knew how to deal with the western side of the state. I depended upon Walter for a lot of advice. Dr. Washington every once in awhile would get it together and say this is what you need to do. In a way it was more Alcorn than JSU and each college had to fight for its own. It's hard to say whether if Robert's interest was primary or secondary education or higher education. I think in later years after I left, from what I hear, he had a much broader view, but in the early years 74-79, and 80. I think his interest was primarily starting the kids off right and to get started right they're less likely to leave

school in secondary. That's why we tried to pass kindergarten legislation. Robert was interested in early childhood education; he thought that if you started right with children that age, you didn't have to worry about them later.

ABSTON: Let me go on to some details. Can you recall some of the legislators who fell in line with Dr. Washington's proposals to upgrade some of the historically black colleges? Do you know readily the names of any colleagues that really supported Dr. Washington across the board?

BROWN: The parties were regional. Everybody said, I'm looking after Walter, someone is looking after Dr. Peoples, and Dr. Reddix at JSU. So part of the region of Natchez and Vicksburg always had a special relationship with Alcorn. One time it got a little rocky because the University of Southern Mississippi was there. About '75 or so there was a brief conspiracy/debate about should Southern stay here or should Alcorn. Walter was down there and he was diplomatic, obviously he thought that Natchez should be under Alcorn, so once we got out of that, there was no question that Alcorn was down the road----10 million dollar MBA building out there. First a nursing school off campus was established here, and it's very much a part of our area. I think Robert was closer to JSU--usually about that time. Valley was so far away from everything they sort of stayed to themselves. But, JSU and Alcorn began to challenge the legislature and Robert was very involved in that. He would show up primarily, and people would be very excited about the college and university committees that regulate universities. Particularly in new construction, new programs and sometimes they would go together. We would establish a school in the University of Southern Mississippi, like technology, you got to have a building, so we would have to have a building and the same thing happened to Alcorn. Dr. Washington was extremely skillful and the people he would normally call upon would be Alcorn alumni. For Dr. Peoples, Fred Banks and Horace Buckley were there, and sometimes there would be JSU alumni. Walter Washington was so skillful and Robert would be involved in some of these elaborate efforts that we never fell out with JSU. Alcorn was the one we were looking after but there was enough support so that neither one or the other was angry because you are getting something and we're getting nothing. And I tell you something else, Buddie Newman he was very close to all the college presidents, and was actually very instrumental at that time.

ABSTON: How did the College Board look upon the growth pattern of these two schools versus Southern Mississippi, Mississippi State, and Ole Miss, because you have a different dynamic there? Did they show any leadership toward JSU and Alcorn?

BROWN: It really depended on finance after 1972 because revenue sharing was going on at that time. We had about 100 million dollars which was a lot of money to distribute to the state widely, and capital prudence doesn't get only one program. And so the colleges after 1972, were all vying; for I need to do this and I need to do that....so it was important that regional and alumni groups got together. I realized that Dr. Washington was very careful, and would say-of the seven things here, these are two I really want and usually when those things happened the group would be given the list.

ABSTON: What is your comment on faculty salaries along with capitalization for new programs? Was there a real strong pursuit of that agenda, with new buildings, and faculty needs?

BROWN: It was directly proportioned to increases and it increased dramatically in 1980. In 1980 when I left there were still only 5 blacks in the House. I don't think any were in the Senate and it was still a very small group of legislators. Robert was coming into his own at that time in the mid-70s. Fred Banks was very articulate and it became all about respect for your colleagues. Black or White, as they grew in stature and as they grow in credibility—but believe me—you only got to tell the story one time. When Robert got up and talked, we listened. In 1975, the legislature was famous for passing resolutions and some of them were politically charged. One of them was to repeal the Voting Rights Acts of 1965; this was about 1974. I never will forget it because it was highly and politically charged and came from a district that was 50% African American, and 30% of those people were registered to vote. I felt a moral obligation to say that this is not right. Robert got up and spoke---and they would routinely pass it. Robert got up and spoke and made a very impassionate plea to put an end to all these things of sending a bad signal, not only to the black community, but to the rest of the world; but of course the bill passed 18 to 4. I heard Robert make that speech. After that the house looked at itself and said we need to stop this. I think Robert set the tone when he spoke in 1976. The resolution was we celebrate 200 years after the bicentennial to be free states to do away with the failure of reconstruction. Robert would have voted that way regardless. Legislatively it was very important.

ABSTON: Was Robert Clark very supportive of community colleges?

BROWN: He was very supportive. The junior college lobby never left and they had strong support. These sixteen presidents were highly influential and intelligent men who were much closer to the sheriff, supervisor and circuit clerk than the college presidents. They were in their counties four or five times a year trying to get money. Robert was dedicated and sometimes torn between the senior and the junior colleges in their fight for the dollars. Yes, Robert was very supportive. I think he saw that as a way for folks to get an education and still be working. Particularly people, who

were 28 years old or 38 years old and a divorced wife or man that has just gotten out of the service. Jackson State University, University of Southern Mississippi cost back then and college was serious business. Sometimes, the senior colleges were not as serious as they are today.

ABSTON: What is your comment on how popular community health centers were in the state in the 70s?

BROWN: I remember in my last term in 76-80 all of a sudden there was a lot of money for health care and a lot of folks vying for it, and creating district administrations. It became real political as to who was going to get allocated nursing homes and which was going to get ten more rooms over here; it got so tied up with the CON laws that the state board of health ran. Hopefully, it got stabilized in the 90s because I know all public hospitals are struggling because of cut backs from the federal and state. I think we've done better in recent years than back then. It got taken out of the legislative process and placed in the administrative process. Dr. Aaron Shirley epitomized being a pioneer, and still he was after 30 years a survivor. In the last few years of Medicaid, the legislature got involved but, that's a whole other political world out there.

ABSTON: Now let me advance on to prison reform. In your estimation, was Robert Clark an advocate of prison reform and capital punishment or not capital punishment?

BROWN: Capital punishment didn't come up very often and most folks in Mississippi didn't oppose it back then. I'm not really sure what Robert's position was on that. All things being equal, he would have opposed capital punishment. I don't think it ever came up on the floor during those twelve years. In that twelve year period, the population hadn't really exploded like it did in the 80s and 90s. But I am confident Robert's position, was one of more humane treatment, and not just necessarily put more money into it. We all assumed it was working okay, I don't know if it was or wasn't. I know that Robert had a keener interest than most for the penitentiary at Parchman.

ABSTON: Are there any unsolicited comments you would like to make before we take off here Attorney Brown?

BROWN: Well, as I said Robert and I served twelve years, even though he's served twenty-four years after that. Robert stayed longer than anybody in the class of 68, ... and I think the turning point in his legislative career was probably the election of Buddie Newman for Speaker----it just happened to have coincided. Robert had a rough time in the first session in 1968. That's when we left in August, and came in January. Robert was a young

man with two kids and it was a wonderful experience for them. The salary was something like \$1500 a session, no matter how long you stayed.

ABSTON: No special session?

BROWN: No special session, not like we have now. I know for a few months Robert was treated with some indifference and some silence, and I think for legislators later on it was a new world. You know how it was in the 60s and I think he felt isolated. But, about mid way during that session, there was a spirit of camaraderie, and since he was a pleasant fellow—you didn't look at Robert and feel like he was glaring at you—or mean. You walked in after a few days and you spoke to Robert and he spoke to you. It took four or five weeks that first session for things to fall. Sonny Meredith was probably a key player who saw that it would be absolutely foolish and wrong to delay this young man from being sworn in and disrupt the first three, four or five weeks of the legislature bringing national attention, to the state. There was mistreatment to some extent in the general attitude of everybody, and then little by little it warmed up—from that little time on in 68 and the special time of 69.

ABSTON: Perhaps, it was popular to co-sponsor a bill with Robert Clark-- is it wrong to say that?

BROWN: Well, it wasn't an issue, look I tell you—you had some folks in the legislature in 1968, I would say aside from the entering class of 30 to 35 people---most of the people in the legislature, the other 85 or so still had very strong feelings, and still came from districts that were overwhelmingly white and you didn't have the effect of 65 -----really until the late 60s maybe the 72 election, it would be awhile and by that time things started to change. He had to endure some things that he shouldn't have, but he never----and it's amazing, Robert could have been angry, and could have been the symbol of defiance but, he never was and I think that was just disarming if you were on the other side of that issue. You couldn't help after a while say-why am I acting this way. The fact that young members who came in the class of 1968, befriended Robert fairly quickly helped the matter. I think that made him the man he came to be. It molded him, his attitude-----

ABSTON: Attorney Brown, thank you very much for agreeing to be interviewed at this hour.

BROWN: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW