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ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

INTERVIEWEE AGREEMENT

You have been asked for information to be used in connection with historic African-American buildings in Mississippi. The purpose of this program is to gather and preserve information for historical and scholarly use.

The interviewer has made a tape recording of your interview. If Jackson State opts to transcribe your interview, you will have the option of reviewing that transcription. Do you want this option? —

The final retyped and edited transcript, together with the tape of the interview will be placed in the Oral History Collection at Jackson State University and the city of Jackson.

I, Robert H. Clark, have read the above, and in view of the historical and scholarly value of this information, in return for a final typed copy of the transcript, I knowingly and voluntarily permit Jackson State University and the city of Jackson, Mississippi, the full use of this information. I hereby grant and assign all of my rights of every kind whatever pertaining to this information, whether or not such rights are now known, recognized, or contemplated, to Jackson State University and the city of Jackson, Mississippi.

Robert H. Clark
Interviewee's Signature

DeFord Harrison
Interviewer's Signature

Date Agreement signed

11/15/04

Oral History number assigned

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INTERVIEWEE: Robert Clark
INTERVIEWER: Alferdteen Harrison
DATE OF INTERVIEW: May 17, 1983
O.H. 83.07

Harrison: Today is May 17, 1983. I am doing the sixth of a series of interviews with Robert Clark.

In our previous interview we talked about your earlier life. Today I would like to talk about your legislative career. What do you remember about the first day you entered the legislature on January 2, 1968.

Clark: There were a series of events that led up to that day that I must tell you about. While campaigning, there were series of threats made on our lives. My challenger, J. P. Love had challenged my seat but they didn't reason that I shouldn't take the seat. Up until the last possible minute he was still trying to get the House to take my seat. A meeting between the House, the governor, and others revealed that I had won the seat fair and square. Just before that meeting adjourned, they called my lawyer, Marion Wright. They told her that they wanted her to bring me to the Capitol about 11:45, I would be able to take my seat.

When I got there, I came through the south side facing Bilbo. They then asked me, for media purposes, to come through the front. I really didn't know the front from the back. I walked down the aisle and there was this big fellow, about 250 pounds, came down the aisle real fast. I didn't know what he was doing.

Harrison: What do you mean?

Clark: I had prepared myself for a head-on battle with him. He stuck his hand out to greet me. He said, "I'm Melvin Henly from Philadelphia, Mississippi." He also stated that he served in the south during Governor Bilbo's term. He stated that he welcomed me to the House and if there was anything that he could do for me, just let him know. He was about 68 years old. He was the first person that befriended me when I came to the legislature.

The Speaker of the House was suppose to have a chair, but he never used it. My first eight years I sat by myself. There were a few people that were a big help to me. One particular person that was very helpful and that was the Speaker of the House. I have not forgotten how nice Buddy Newman was to me during those days.

Clark: It was very difficult for me to get recognized in earlier days. I would be waving my hands, and the Speaker would be looking directly at me, but recognize me. Some of my white friends had told me when I came to the legislature that I was going to see and hear things that I didn't want to see or hear.

During this time I was somewhat vocal and militant. Many of my high school friends thought I wasn't going to make it. They thought I was too hotheaded. One day on the floor I waved and waved my hands and couldn't get recognized. I walked out of the House with the intentions of not coming back. Butch Latmont, Chairman of the Tax Commission, came and insisted that I come back.

It was either Butch Latmont or Buddy Newman in the Chair before I finally got recognized. One fellow used the term "nigger", and I called his attention on that. Some of my white colleague told him that if he ever used that term again, that he was going to burst his damn teeth down his throat. He never used that term again.

I have been Chairman of the Education Committee for seven years. Some of the whites thought that I wasn't capable of running the committee. After seven years, I can just about get whatever I want out of the committee. Sometimes people in my committee would go back and tell the Speaker of the House that I wasn't running the committee right. The Speaker told me, "Clark, you are the Chairman, make them obey you or tell them to leave. If they don't want to leave, send and get security and have them thrown out".

Harrison: Have you ever done that?

Clark: I have threaten to do it, but not actually carried it through. It has been a long hard fight since I came here. I have seen a lot of black member of the House grow tremendously. When the first three black came here, we worked together beautifully. When 15 black got elected, it was a tough year for me. After being in the House for years, I realized that you didn't have to have the same color skin, or attend the same church I to represent my people of this state.

Many of the young representatives that came in looked at me as being a part of the power guard. They didn't have in confidence in what I said or did. Some of those person were young and had not gone through the integration. They brought that same anti-white attitude with them into the House. I didn't feel that we should be about that, I thought we should work together.

Harrison: 1968 was quite an experience for you. At what point did you ask to serve on the committee?

Clark: The Speaker of the House has a sheet that he passes out for you to write what committee you wanted to serve on. I got real good committee assignments, however, I didn't have much power. I had power on the Education committee. In 1964, I introduced a compulsive Education Bill, Louis Billup had previously introduced one when I went to Atlanta, Georgia to Martin Luther King, Jr's funeral. Anyway, they called the bill up that day and killed it. About six years ago we introduced another compulsive school attendance bill. The Chairman, Charlie Allen was opposed to the compulsive school attendance. Went sent some of the person opposed to the bill into a different room across the hall. We then introduced the bill again and it passed. I was gratified to see the compulsive school attendance bill become a law because there were a lot of things I pulled in order to make it become a reality.

Harrison: Why did you choose the committee that you did, Education, Accounting Affairs, and Social Welfare?

Clark: I chose education because that is my profession. After education, public health was my next chose. I was one of the initiator for the medicaid law. I was also on the penitentiary committee. I was the first one to introduce prison reform.

Harrison: You mention earlier about being on the front row by yourself, what was your reaction at that time?

Clark: I knew I couldn't afford to work the address when I wanted to. It saved a lot of time. When I was sitting at a large table, and there were five steak plates, I got to eat all five myself. Bill Minor and Jim Simpson were one of the first to sit with me.

There are several things that I say jokingly. Remember I told you when I came to the capitol they wanted me to come through the front. Well the reason they wanted me to come through the front was because Bilbo was standing there. Supposedly, he wasn't going to let any damn nigger enter the capitol.

Senator Eastland announced that he was going to run for office. I endorsed him along with Aaron Henry. I didn't endorse Eastland for his pass voting record but because I knew he could win and that I could get him to represent Mississippi well.

Harrison: You mentioned that you seniority and that you could seat somewhere else if you wanted to.

Clark: I can, but I refuse to move. Now we have to draw number and whoever gets the first number gets to chose whatever seats he wants.

Harrison: Do person coming in now still have to do that?

Clark: The new people have to step aside until the elder people get their seats. After they get their seats then members of the delegation can select seats for their colleagues. This process is almost gone. Now they usually select seats on the basis of seniority.

Harrison: During the first legislative session in 1980 you introduced an amendment to a bill that was being cut off in the House, do you remember that?

Clark: I told you that I attempted to introduce amendments, but they moved the previous question, meaning that they cut off the debate and no amendment can be offered.

Bill Minor talked to me on several occasions. Bill was a friend of mine, he wasn't a buddy-buddy, but he didn't approve of the treatment that I was receiving.

Harrison: When you attended dinners at the legislature, do you remember if Bill Minor was one of the reporters who sat with you.

Clark: At the first dinner I went to, I sat by myself. On several occasion I sat by myself. Bill Minor was the first person who sat with me.

Harrison: You mentioned earlier about having gone to Dr. Martin Luther King's Jr. funeral. Did his assassination have any impact on you as a black legislator?

Clark: No, because it was a lot of violence going on then. I didn't live in fear because I knew anything could happen at any time. During this time this was a common thing. I am a strong believer in Dr. King's work and I want to make sure that it is carried on.

Harrison: Did you go to the legislature the next day?

Clark: Yes.

Harrison: What was the attitude there?

Clark: I guess they knew better than not to say anything in my presence. I am not a violent individual, but I wouldn't have stood by and let them make jokes about his death. I heard a fellow make a comment after Robert Kennedy was killed. He said that that was the only way he would get a hair cut, by getting his damn brains blown out. I didn't say anything, I just went into the booth and made a call and he was defeated. He just couldn't understand why the black folks didn't vote for him.

Harrison: Do you think the marches that Martin Luther King Jr. made before the election had any bearing on you winning the election?

Clark: Yes, it had an impact on my election. Without the marches we would not have had the Civil Rights Act and the Fair Housing Act. King was a revolutionist for change. Dr. King did more for this country than any single individual will do or have done during my life time. There should be a day to celebrate Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Harrison: I am not certain, but I think it was in 1972 or 1974 that you introduced a bill to make Martin Luther King Jr. and Medgar Evers birthdays to be a legal holiday. What motivated you to do this?

Clark: Medgar Evers was a native Mississippian. He put his life on the line. This state is a better state because of him and we should recognize him for his efforts. The same thing holds true about Dr. King.

Harrison: What has been the reaction of the white legislators?

Clark: Their reaction was, "I'm not in opposition to it, but we already have enough holidays. We don't need anymore holidays to pay people for not working."

Harrison: Did you feel like Medgar Evers and Dr. King should have the same holiday or separate ones?

Clark: Different holidays. I wouldn't mind Mississippi if we had it on the same day, but the bill I introduced didn't have them on the same day.

Harrison: Is there any strategy that you think could be used to make this a reality?

Clark: Political strategy can cause it to become a reality.

Harrison: How is the effectiveness of a legislator's power measured?

Clark: If he has the ability to influence decision in the legislature and get others to participate in the decision making process.

Harrison: What about the amount of power that a black legislator has?

Clark: Any black legislator can have power if he knows how to participate in the political process. Black legislator power would be measured solely by the number of votes that he would be able to influence.

Harrison: When you switch positions, is that not necessarily being dishonest or is it perceived as being trickery?

Clark: When you switch position, it is perceived as being soft and having a yellow streak in your back. You are also perceived as a person who has not done their homework.

Everytime that I go to the House I am prepared. I know about every piece of legislature being introduced.

Harrison: I am trying to access those bill that you introduced in the House.

Clark: After this question, I have to go to a meeting.

Harrison: In 1975 out of 35 bill only 5 were passed. What do you feel about this kind of average?

Clark: For Robert Clark at that time, that was a good average. You have to understand that I could have introduced a lot of garbage and got a lot of stuff passed. I wasn't interested in introducing garbage, I was interested in educating Mississippi through the legislative needs. Many of the bills I introduced I knew were not going to passed, but someone else picked them up and they were passed. Just like when I introduced the Prison Reform, Early Childhood Education, and Compulsive School Attendance, Property Tax Reform, etc., I knew it wasn't going to pass. But I knew someone had to do it. You have to realize that I was introducing tough pieces of legislation that others were afraid to introduce.

END OF INTERVIEW