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Interviewee: Robert Clark  
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Interviewer: John Dittmer  
Videographer: John Bishop  
Length: 01:58:24

[Sound quality is uneven throughout the interview, almost as though the recording is voice-activated, and there is quite a bit of static.]

John Bishop: We're on.

John Dittmer: Today is Thursday, March fourteenth, 2013. My name is John Dittmer, and I am here in Pickens, Mississippi, with videographer John Bishop to interview Mr. Robert Clark, the first African American to be elected to the Mississippi House of Representatives in the twentieth century. This interview will become part of the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, D.C. Representative Clark, we are delighted to be here today and we thank you for taking the time to talk with us.

Robert Clark: It's a pleasure to have both of you here today.

JD: Well, thank you. I usually begin the interview by asking the participant to talk about their family, and I'll do that, but I'm going to start this one by asking you to talk about this house that we're in now.

RC: This house—I was born in this house. My father built this house approximately a hundred years ago, and this is the only address that I have ever had. I have never left this place.

JD: Tell us about the history of the house and the family.

RC: Well, my great-grandparents were slaves on this same property that we own today. And after slavery, my great-grandfather's former slave master sold him the property, and it has been in the family ever since. And when I was growing up, I felt like I wanted to go to Chicago or, like everybody else was doing, leave Mississippi. But after I graduated from twelfth grade, my father, who was living here then, and my mother had deceased, and my older aunt—my father said, "Me and Sister Annie want to see you."

Well, I got really afraid. I didn't know what they wanted. So, finally, I made my mind up. I said, "Daddy, let's go over home and see what you and Sister want." And I drove our [2:23] car over there, and we got to the gate. I thought I was afraid before, but I really was nervous and was shaking. So, when I walked in, she was standing over the stove. Now, I really thought some girl had told a story on me and had said I had impregnated her. [Laughter] Well, I knew that wasn't true! [Laughter]

So, my father said, "Sister Annie, here this boy is." She said, "Boy, when you go to school and finish, we want you to come back home and take care of the family property." "Oh, no, not me! You know I don't like the country! You know I can't stand the filth!" I put up a strong argument, but my father and my aunt never said a word. So, finally, when I had argued all I could, I said, "I don't want to, but if y'all want me to, I will." And she said, "We do." [Laughs]

And that's how I wound up coming back home and being on this place where, as I said earlier, my great-grandparents were slaves right on this plantation. This is the plantation where they were slaves.

JD: Did you have brothers and sisters?

RC: Yes, I had one brother and one sister by my father's first marriage. Then after my mother died, my father married again, and he had another son. But my sister, you know, saw fit to go to the big city and bright lights. She went to California, then Chicago, and she finally wound up and she's still living in Las Vegas now.

JD: Oh, wow!

RC: But my brother left home to go to school in Memphis, high school, because we had no high school for African Americans then. High schools was only in the little towns, Durant or Lexington, but you had to board to go to school there. So, after my brother went to Yazoo City School [0:05:00] for ninth grade, staying with an aunt of ours, he decided to go to Memphis and stay with an uncle of ours and go to high school at Booker T. Washington.

JD: Ah.

RC: So, he did, and he never came back home.

JD: Oh, so you were the one?

RC: Yes.

JD: You were the one. I'm going to read you something, a quote. Jack Bass, in his foreword to Melany Neilson's book about your campaigns for Congress, begins with this sentence: "As an eleven-year-old black youth in Holmes County, Robert Clark was jailed with his father, who was arrested on murder charges. The boy was released the next day. A white

lawyer in the county seat of Lexington defended the father and won an acquittal on the grounds of self-defense. The year was 1940.” Wow! Tell us about that.

RC: [Laughs] Well, that is exactly right. I didn’t know anything about what was going on. But we know we had lots of law enforcement officials here, and they not only carried me to jail and locked me up overnight, but they carried my brother to jail and locked him up. They locked both of us up.

JD: Well, tell us what happened. Why were they out here?

RC: Well, they had found an individual dead about a couple of miles from here, not on our property, but off of our property. And they suspicioned that it was my father.

JD: Oh.

RC: But I—you know, I was so small and young and I didn’t know what was going on.

JD: So, he was acquitted.

RC: Yes.

JD: But you spent—why did—why do you think they put you in jail, too?

RC: Well, they not only put me in jail. My older brother—they put us in jail, also. I really think they were just trying to intimidate us by putting us in jail. You know, in nineteen and forty, at that time, I was 12 years old. [Laughs]

JD: Wow. Wow, what a—I assume that there—most of the time was somewhat calmer than that, though. Tell us what it was like growing up here.

RC: Well, growing up here, we grew up on our own place, and I can truthfully say I never worked on a plantation one day in my life. I never worked in a white man’s cotton field one day in my life. But because we grew up on our place, a lots of blacks, most of the blacks,

looked at us as being different. And I've always told them, "I'm no different than you. All of us is one and the same. You are just as much as I am."

And growing up here, we had to go to school. That was no "if and and." School terms may have been four months or five months. It all depends up on how early you got the cotton out of the field before school would start, because the white man did not want the black children on his plantation leaving the cotton field to go to school. And it all depended, in the spring of the year, on the temperature. If it got warm, then school closed, because you went to the field and you sprouted and you knocked stalks and what have you. So, I grew up with a four-to-five-month school in grammar school.

JD: Where did you go to school? Where was the school?

RC: I went to school Sallis Flat. That's three miles this way.

JD: How did you get there?

RC: I had to walk there. Rain, sleet, or snow, we had to walk. And when my aunts taught the school west of here, Holy City, which was two-and-a-half miles, we went to school there for two years. But we had to—we could go through the field [0:10:00] and, if it didn't rain, and get there. But if it rained, we had to go around the road to get there, which was three-and-a-half miles.

JD: Wow.

RC: But one of the things my mother made sure, that rain, sleet, or snow, that we never missed a day out of school. And since you asked about that, the white children would be riding busses, and they'd come by throwing spitballs out after us. So I, you know, would get off behind my uncle and aunt, who were schoolteachers, and I would get a pocket of gravels. And when

they would throw those spitballs off after me, then I'd throw those gravels back after them.

[Laughter]

But I am proud to say at least two of those individuals have come to my house and have sat right here in this same room where we are today, asking me for my help, to help them. Yes, I helped them. I didn't hold it against them. But I did not forget to remember, "Do you remember throwing your spitballs off after me?" [Laughs]

JD: Bet that made them a little uncomfortable, didn't it?

RC: They would just laugh it off.

JD: Yeah, yeah.

RC: Um-hmm.

JD: Was this a one-room schoolhouse? Would you have one teacher or more than one teacher in your school?

RC: It was two teachers. Two teachers.

JD: Eight grades?

RC: Two teachers, eighth grade, and that was it. Now, that was high school—I mean, that was grammar school. But after high school, you had to board off from home, because there was no busses to get African American children to school.

JD: Now, how far away was the high school from here?

RC: Um, 16 miles to Lexington. The next one, 24, Durant. Now, my first year, my uncle became the principal of Mount Olive Vocational High School. That was north of Lexington. My ninth grade year, I stayed there in the teachers' home. But his family was multiplying very, you know, rapidly, and there wasn't enough room for me to stay there. So, then, my tenth grade year, I enrolled in the Holmes County Training School, which is now Williams-Sullivan at Durant.

JD: Yeah.

RC: But every Monday morning, rain, sleet, or snow, I stepped off of that porch headed to Pickens, just like I'm headed to my car shed or carport, headed to Pickens to catch that 2:00 a.m. train to get to Durant.

JD: Uh, wow!

RC: Rain, sleet, or snow.

JD: You know, there—that is amazing, but also probably most of the people, kids you knew, didn't go to high school, did they?

RC: They didn't go to high school. They did not go.

JD: But your parents really were insisting that you were going to do?

RC: They insisted that I was going to go. And after, you know, when I was third or fourth grade, oh yes, if it had not been for them, I would have dropped out of school. But after, you know, I had reached that age, I was determined that I was going to get an education.

JD: So, here on—what did you do? Did you have cattle, hogs, cotton?

RC: We had cattle, we had hogs, we had chickens, we had turkeys, we had geese, and of course, we had the horses and mules—the horses and mules to pull the wagon and to pull the plow. And I started to making a full day in the field when I was seven years old.

JD: Wow.

RC: Plowing when I was seven years old.

JD: Growing up in a hurry. [Laughs]

RC: And I had to reach up for the plow handles.

JD: Wow.

RC: It was over my head. And I can remember them—they'd always give the youngest person what they called their old hag. That's, you know, an older mule or horse. And the old horse that they gave me when I first started, she didn't walk. She just trotted very fast. [Laughs] And I can remember [0:15:00] one day when I was plowing, and the plow hit a stump, and the handle went up and hit me under the cheek and knocked me flat on my back.

JD: Oh, my goodness!

RC: Yes.

JD: Oh!

RC: But one thing I did—I knew. I knew that we had our farm, but I *knew* I was not going to farm for a living.

JD: Yeah, yeah.

RC: But when I—when I went to college, my aunts was farming. They had never been married. As quick as I'd get out of college, I would come home and take care of their crops for them.

JD: Um-hmm. How many acres did you have here?

RC: It's 228 acres in the family place.

JD: Oh, that's a good-sized plot.

RC: 228 acres in the family place, and I have bought 82 acres surrounding the family place, which was originally—all of it was in the family. But some of it had gotten out of the family by some of the individuals dying and their spouses marrying again, and it got out of the family.

JD: Yeah. What was—was religion very important in your life? Education certainly was.



RC: Religion was very, very important. It was very, very important. And frankly speaking, I confessed Christ at three-and-a-half years old. And individuals asked my mother, said, “Elaine, you going let that boy join the church and be baptized?” She said, “Yes! He knows what he’s doing,” and that was the truth. If my mother had not allowed me to join the church and be baptized, that would have been a tragic mistake.

JD: Yeah.

RC: Because that—what I got at three-and-a-half years old has carried me thus far.

JD: Wow.

RC: [Laughs]

JD: Where did you go to church?

RC: Pleasant Green. That’s a little church about two miles from here, a little wooden church. We’re trying to rebuild a brick church.

JD: Oh?

RC: The only reason we have not rebuilt because my grandfather, when they built the church, you know, the white folks just let them build on their land and, you know, they built there. But we can’t—we had no deeds to it.

JD: Yeah.

RC: So, we can’t rebuild there without deeds.

JD: Oh, I see.

RC: So, we’re going to rebuild the church, Pleasant Green.

JD: So, you said, I believe, that you didn’t have many experiences with whites growing up, that you were not on a plantation, that you were going to separate schools. Tell us a little bit

about what segregation was like in this part of the world. Where did you become aware that there were two different ways of doing things?

RC: Well, my mother always told me and my brother, when we would leave here riding our horses, going to Ebenezer—every time she would tell us, said, “Now, y’all, you all is just as much as those white boys.” She would call their names. She said, “But you can’t do this, you can’t do that.” She’d say, “It’s not right, but that’s the law and that’s what you’ve got to do.”

And I’ve been knowing, you know, segregation all of my life, because since I was large enough, my folks taught me. And I had a grandfather, my father’s father, who was a slave in Hinds County, and he was eleven years old at Emancipation. And he told me about him never have worn a pair of pants until after slavery. He always wore something like a dress or a gown. But when I got, you know, too large for them to carry me to church at night because I’d go to sleep, and he was too old to walk to church at night, and when I was not large enough to go to the field, and he was too old to go to the field, then they would leave him at home with me. But he told me as a child what slavery was like. [0:20:00] And he says, “Young man, things is going to be better, but young men like you is going to have to grow up and make a difference.”

JD: Oh.

RC: So—

JD: Wow, you had that from the very beginning.

RC: That from the very beginning.

JD: So, when you and your brother rode your horses into Ebenezer, what did you find there? What was the town like? And what did you have to be careful about?

RC: Well, you had to be careful about that you didn’t make any—infrigate any white person. You didn’t say “yes” and “no” to any white person. You made sure you didn’t look at a

white lady. If she was coming, you'd turn your head, because they may get upset about you looking at her.

JD: Yeah.

RC: And she, you know, she always told us—and, you know, we adhered to what she said. And I always knew—and that's one of the problems that we have today and that's one of the things I'm going to be spending the rest of my life to work on. Many African Americans don't know who they are. Some African Americans right now, if a child is smart and doing well in his books, they'll tell him, "You're trying to act like you're white," see, and that's one of the things that we've got to get rid of.

JD: Yeah.

RC: But this is something I have known all of my life: that I was equal to anybody. I'm not as smart as anybody, but I'm equal to anybody. [Laughs]

JD: When you finished high school, then, you decided to go on to college, and even fewer blacks were going to college at that point. And you chose Jackson State, which is a good distance from here but still within the state, within a couple of hours drive. But tell us what it was like, your decision to go there, and what was Jackson State like just after World War II?

RC: First of all, let me tell you my first choice was Tougaloo, because I wanted to be a lawyer. You may have heard of Perry Howard.

JD: Oh, yes.

RC: Perry Howard lived north of here, between here and Ebenezer. And I always wanted to be a lawyer and I thought I had to major in pre-law to be a lawyer. And I wanted to enroll at Tougaloo, but I wanted to be—had to be a work-aid student, and Tougaloo told me that it would take me eight years to graduate if I did work-aid student. So, I decided to go to Jackson College.

That's where my father had gone and some of my other folks. And my uncle wanted me to go to Alcorn. That's where my uncle had gone. But I know I didn't want nothing that had farming, so I didn't go to Alcorn.

So, I went over to my aunt's house, the one I was telling you about. They gave me, I think, a dollar and a quarter. I came back by, went down to my Uncle Lewis's house—that's a grand-uncle of mine—and he gave me a dollar and fifty cents. So, I left here, headed to Jackson College—it was Jackson College for Negro Teachers at that time—with less than five dollars in my pocket.

JD: Wow.

RC: And I left here, walking, walking to Pickens. Walked to Pickens, caught the bus, the Trailways bus, and rode into Jackson. Then, I caught the Ten Lynch Mill Street bus and rode out to Jackson College. So, when I got out to Jackson College and I got ready to enroll, I told them, "I want to be a work-aid. I want to work my way. I don't have any money." They said, "It takes money to go to Jackson State. If you ain't got no money, call your folks and tell your folks to come get you." I said, "Well, my folks don't have a phone." "Well, call a neighbor." "Well, not any of my neighbors have a phone."

So, they said, "We're going put you up for the night. But if you ain't got no money when you get back here tomorrow, you're going have to go home." Alright, all the other students, you know, who went to register, they got the meal ticket, but I went back to the barracks, Room 205, where they assigned me, and I stayed there all day. [0:25:00] No food.

So, the next morning, the other kids is getting up, going to the dining hall. But I got up and went to the registrar's office and I was sitting there, reading the registrar's paper, when the registrar came in. And the registrar said, "You have any money today?" I said, "No, sir, I don't."

He said, “Well, we’re going to send you down to the president’s office.” So, we went—they sent me down to Dr. Reddix’s office.

When I walked into his office, he said, “Young man, I understand you’re wanting to go to college and don’t have no money.” I said, “Yes, sir, that’s right.” “Don’t you know it takes money to go to college?” I said, “Yes, sir, I know that.” He said, “Well, I tell you what, young man. You can lead a horse to the water, but you can’t make him drink.” He said, “Now, we’re going give you a chance to get an education, but we can’t get—well, we can’t *make* you get one, but we’re going to make sure we bump your head against the wall.”

So, what he worked out then was to—I could work with the custodians on the yard for twenty-five cents an hour. That would pay for half of my tuition. And the other half, I had a job of moving the garbage out of the women’s dormitories, two women’s dormitories. And as God would have it to be, you know, I went through that year.

And I participated in basketball. Alright, I’m a fox hunter, and we used—you know, have followed the dogs all across the woods at night. And I went out for track, and they asked me, “What do you run?” Well, I didn’t know anything about no two-twenty, four-forty, or anything like that, and I said, “Track!” [Laughter] They said louder, “What do you run?” I said, “Track!” I was saying that because I didn’t want to tell them I didn’t know.

They said, “Well, we’re going see what you run.” So, then they put me into—you know, started me out, and I outran everybody in everything except the hundred-yard dash. [Laughter] So, we got the conference championship that year in track. And then, after that year, I was the first person to get a track scholarship at Jackson State University, a full-time track scholarship.

JD: That’s a very interesting story about what you had to go through just to be able to be there.

RC: That's right.

JD: What were your favorite subjects? Now, you said you wanted to be a lawyer. Was that still your ambition now?

RC: Well, I wanted to be a lawyer. And the dean of students called me into her office one day, and she pulled her eyeglasses off and leaned over. And she said, "Young man, I see where you want to be a lawyer." I said, "Yes, ma'am." And she put her finger so close to my nostrils until you couldn't get a strand of cat hair between them. She said, "We are not going to let you use the teaching profession to become a lawyer! And if you want to become a lawyer, you pack your duds and get away from here!"

JD: Ugh!

RC: And I went back home, went back to the dormitory, and packed my clothes—she said "duds"—but they never called me back. And, you know, after they didn't call me back, in a week or so, I unpacked them and just went on. [Laughter] But I didn't have anyone to tell me that I could have been a lawyer without majoring in pre-law.

JD: So, you decided to become a teacher then?

RC: Yes, sir, I decided to become a teacher because that's all, practically all an African American could do at that time, other than being a janitor or going to the field.

JD: Yeah. I see here where you left Jackson State before you actually graduated to teach second grade in Durant and that you graduated in 1963.

RC: 1953.

JD: 1953—

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JD: Before you graduated to teach. Did you need the money? Or you wanted the experience?

RC: No, sir. No, sir, [0:30:00] let me tell you what happened. They had, during my junior year, they implemented a program in health and physical education. And the dean, Dean H. T. Sampson, set up a program for five of us. And we could, you know, graduate and get our degree in health and physical education, but we'd have to go back to school that summer. So, it was four men, four males, and one lady. And the lady met me on campus one day and said, "Hey, we're going to have to be here for five years!" I said, "What do you mean we're going to have to be here for five years?" She said, "That's what Dean Sampson say."

So, I went to Dean Sampson's office. I said, "Dean, I have the grade point average. I have passed all of the tests and I have done everything. I have met all of the requirements that you set up." He said, "Well, Clark, I'm sorry. I can't set up a program for one student. But I can set up a program for five." So, when *he* said that I was going to have to stay there that fifth year, that's when I dropped out of school. See, we were on quarters.

JD: Yeah.

RC: And that's when I dropped out of school, at the end of the fall quarter. And I—Mr. Sullivan, where I finished high school, hired me to teach there. So, that was the reason that I dropped out. I wasn't going to stay there five years, because when you be there, you know, and students that have stayed there, and when they come back on the campus and see you there when they come back to a basketball game, "Hey, Grandpa!"

JD: [Laughs] Yeah!

RC: "Hey, Grandma!" [Laughs]

JD: Yeah, I see.

RC: But I had not flunked a thing.

JD: No, no. So, you didn't get your degree then?

RC: I did go back and get my degree there.

JD: A year later, in 1954—well, two years later in—well, two events. One was the *Brown versus Board of Education* decision that came down in '54. What was the word around the community then? Was that—a lot of publicity nationally about school integration. What was happening here?

RC: The word was “Segregation now and segregation forever,” and that was it. And they did not believe that *Brown versus the Board of Education*—they did not believe that they was going to have to adhere to it. And any individual that acted in a manner where they believed in that, those individuals was immediately released.

JD: Yeah.

RC: For example, over in the Delta, when I was teaching school over in Louise, we had an eight-month school. But your first six weeks or two months would be half-days, and then, in the spring of the year, your last two months or six weeks would be a half-day. Because in the fall of the year, they'd be going home to pick cotton, and in the spring of the year, they'd be going home to go to the field.

JD: Yeah.

RC: So, when I had taught over in Louise for seven years, the superintendent of education sent for me to come to his office one afternoon after school. And I went to his office and said, “Yes, sir, Mr. Brown. I understand you want to see me.” He said, “Yes. I heard that you said it would be alright for white children and black children to go to school together.”



I said, “Yes, sir, Mr. Brown, I did say that. And I said that the white parents need to explain to their children that it’s fine, and the black parents need to explain to their children that it’s fine.” He said, “You really believe that, huh?” I said, “Yes, sir.” He got up, [0:35:00] put his hat on, walked out of his office and left me sitting there in his office. But at the end of the school term, I got a message that I was no longer needed in the school system.

JD: So, just because you said that, you were fired?

RC: Um-hmm, um-hmm.

JD: Well, this was a tough time, because the next year, in 1955, Emmett Till was murdered.

RC: Um-hmm.

JD: Talk about your recollections of that and how you felt.

RC: Well, I knew it was wrong. During the time that Emmett Till was murdered, I was, you know, a high school official and a college official also. We were at the fall conference, getting ready, workshops for the Southwestern Athletic Conference, when he got killed. But I was not a bit surprised. But one of the things—some of the things that happened in Louise, you know, around Louise after I left—I was glad that the superintendent did fire me, because of some of the things that had happened to some of the other folks, had been put in lakes and etcetera, and I was, you know, glad it did not happen to me.

But at the same time when that happened to me, there was three gentlemen came to see me. One gentleman was just a parent, quiet, you wouldn’t think he—you know, never say a word if you don’t say anything to him. The other gentleman had students going to school there, and his wife also taught there. And the other gentleman was a preacher, but he was a non-pastoring preacher. They came to see me.

And that preacher told me, said, “I understand the superintendent don’t want you.” He said, “You don’t have to go nowhere. You ain’t teaching a damn one of his kids.” I said, “Well, if he doesn’t want me, I don’t want to stay here.” He said, “But you ain’t teaching his kids!” But God put it on my heart to go ahead and stay and to not fight it. And I was glad that I did.

JD: Well, I see in the ’50s you taught for seven years at the Humphreys County Training School in the Delta. Is that correct?

RC: That was the Humphreys County Training School in the Delta. And while I was at the Humphreys County Training School in the Delta, I think the year was nineteen and fifty-six, I believe it was, ’56 or ’57, but when we were getting ready for baccalaureate services, we went into Belzoni, me and another black instructor, to get our hair trimmed that night. And when I got up out of the chair, Reverend Lee took my seat. He was sitting there waiting next. And when we got to the baccalaureate services the next morning, we had a young lady that lived in Belzoni going to our school, and she broke the news to us that Reverend Lee had been killed, you know, had been shot about two houses from the barber shop.

JD: And he was shot because he was starting to ask people to register to vote, correct?

RC: Because he was asking people to register to vote, and that’s why he was shot and killed. And it is my understanding that some of the individuals that may have known something about it, that their bossman gave them money to send them away from here.

JD: Uh-huh.

RC: Um-hmm.

JD: Yeah. About that time, the Citizens Council was born, too, in opposition to the *Brown* decision. Was that a—?

RC: Well—

JD: The white Citizens Council—was that a presence in your area? Were you aware of what they were doing? And did they try to interfere in anything that you were doing?

RC: Yes, sir, I was very much aware. The Citizens Council was ruling things then. Not the legislature, and not the governor, but it was the Citizens Council ruling things. And I happened to see [0:40:00] in the—you know they had the Sovereignty Commission?

JD: Um-hmm.

RC: I happened to see in that report some years later that the superintendent of Humphreys County reported to the Sovereignty Commission that “I have gotten rid of all of the troublemakers.” [Laughs] And I assume I was one of those troublemakers that he was talking about.

JD: Oh, I see. Yes, yeah.

RC: And another thing. This is not, you know, not talking about me. My father was a schoolteacher. He was fired in Holmes County because he was teaching voter registration classes. Alright, he went to Madison County and taught at Madison-Rosenwald School, principal there for two years. And then, he was fired there, and he could not get another job in Mississippi. See, what they would do, they would take your name and give your name to the Sovereignty Commission. That Sovereignty Commission would send those names to all of the superintendents of education.

JD: We should probably say here that the Sovereignty Commission was an agency appointed by the state, and it was really a secret police, wasn't it?

RC: That's right!

JD: And they had files on practically everybody.

RC: That's right.

JD: So, it was really dangerous to be a teacher and to say anything that went against the white supremacist system.

RC: Well, they—you know, most teachers, or lots of teachers, you know, allow their manhood or personhood to be taken away from them. But never was I going to allow my manhood or my personhood to be taken from me.

JD: Um-hmm.

RC: For example, over at Louise, when we got our first set of new books in the library, he sent word down—I was assistant principal—for there is a book in the library with a picture of a black rabbit and a white rabbit on the back of it, and for me to pull that book and bring it to his office immediately. Said if black children see that, they will get the idea that they are supposed to play with white children. And I sent word back to the superintendent, “If you want that D-A-M-N book pulled, you’ll have to come by here and pull it yourself.” [Laughter]

JD: And you kept your job!

RC: Well, no, I—you know. I guess that led up to my termination, which was fine.

JD: So, it was just very difficult. Your father and you and probably others who dared to say what you meant and what you believed were likely to get in trouble and pay for it.

RC: Yes, sir. And I remember my granddaddy, what I was talking about when I was small, he’d get up at the church and be telling folk about they should register to vote and do this and that and the other. And I’d see folk walking out. I was about three or four years old. “Old Man Clark going get somebody killed.”

And I was wondering, you know, “Ain’t no white folk here. How they going know it?” But I didn’t know at that time that folk go back and tell white folk everything.

JD: Yeah, the Sovereignty Commission had black agents.

RC: Yes, um-hmm.

JD: At some point you—when did you go to Michigan State for your master's? And talk about what it was like?

JB: Can we pause one second?

JD: Yeah, um-hmm.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JD: Okay.

RC: Okay. I had been taught all of my life, and psychology books had taught me that blacks are equal to whites. You know, ability is not given to race, creed, or color. And most of the blacks at that time was going to Tuskegee. Alright, and, as you said a few minutes ago, a lots of them was flocking to Indiana. But I wanted to go to a place where I wanted to make sure to see if I measured up, if I really was equal.

So, I chose three schools. I chose [0:45:00] Michigan State, I chose Notre Dame, and I chose the University of California. The University of California was so far. Because I didn't have money to get out there, I'd have to go to Jackson and make loans on furniture I didn't have in my house. And Notre Dame taught too much religion. You know, I'm a Christian. I wasn't against religion, but religion wasn't what I wanted. So, then that left Michigan State, so I went to Michigan State.

JD: I guess we should point out here that there was no place in Mississippi where you could get a master's degree.

RC: There was no place in Mississippi I could go to get a master's degree. I had to leave the state of Mississippi to get the master's degree. They would pay—the state would pay the difference for you to go there and get a degree. And during my last year at Michigan State, one

of the professors at Jackson State asked me about coming back there. And I'd tell him, "No, I'm going to go ahead and finish my work at Michigan State." He said, "Oh, you think they're better than we are." [Laughs] I said, "No, sir, doc. That's not it." But I really wanted to see if I measured up to white folk or not. I wanted to see. I had been taught that all of my life.

JD: Well, they asked you to teach in an all-white school. Talk about that and the decision you made there, Mackinac Island.

RC: Yeah, at the Mackinac Island, I was offered a job up there to integrate the system up there. And he thought that I had been accustomed to integration and that I could stand it better. And I first accepted the job, but after thinking about it, I called him and told him that I was not going to accept the job.

Now, let me tell you about my first class at Michigan State University, a class of, I think, about 35. I was the only African American in the class. And the professor asked a question. I can't remember what the question is, but I remember that question from maybe my sophomore year at Jackson State. But I was too nervous to raise my hand.

One guy from the West Coast raised his hand and answered the question. I knew he was wrong. The professor said, "No." A guy from the East Coast raised his hand, answered the question. I knew he was wrong. The professor said, "No." By that time, my little shaking hand had gotten up, [laughing] and I answered the question. And he said, "Sir, you are correct."

And from that day until this one, I have had no fear. And that's why it did not bug me when I went to the House of Representatives, a hundred and twenty-two members, a hundred and twenty-one of them white. That's why it didn't bug me one bit! [Laughs]

JD: Ah! So, it was good that you got away—

RC: Yes, sir.

JD: And saw what the competition was like.

RC: That's right.

JD: Then you came back. You turned down that job and from 1961 to '66, you taught and coached at Lexington High School back in Holmes County. And that was the period when the Civil Rights Movement really got underway here. Tell us what you remember about those years, both in terms of your teaching and in terms of what was going on in the community.

RC: Well, I was teaching during that time. And I do remember when the Mileston Fourteen—happened Mr. McLain sent me uptown that day.

JD: This was when they decided to try to register.

RC: Yeah, when they was—decided to try to register. And I might reiterate here that my father and one other man, black man, were the last two names, black names, that they erased off the books because they didn't erase theirs off. And then, when I found out about the Civil Rights Movement—I really [0:50:00] didn't know about it, and when I first tried to become a part of it, some of the blacks thought that the white folk were sending me to spy on them. And I really got into the Movement through Henry and Sue, when I, you know, went to meet Henry and Sue and talk to them.

JD: Now, we should probably point out these are the Lorenzis.

RC: Yeah.

JD: These were a white couple who came to Holmes County in the fall of 1964.

RC: That's right.

JD: Okay.

RC: That's right. And Henry and Sue, you know, accepted me. And then, they gradually accepted me. But they thought I was coming for, you know, to get the message and carry it back to the white folks.

JD: Well, it was—yeah, and when you were teaching at that time, were any of your students actively involved? Did they see the Civil Rights Movement as something they wanted to do?

RC: Oh, yes, sir. Yes, sir. I had quite a few students actively involved. One young man, Walter Pitsford, he was one of my football players. He went down. They punched him in his side, and he had to miss spring practice for about two weeks.

JD: Oh.

RC: And we had, you know, quite a few students that was involved.

JD: We had the Freedom Summer here in 1964, where a lot of students came down from the North. Many of them were white, and about thirty of them were in Holmes County. Do you remember Freedom Summer and the challenge of the Freedom Democratic Party?

RC: Yes, sir. I do remember the Freedom Summer and the challenge of the Freedom Democratic Party of 1964, but I was proud to be a part of the challenge in 1968. [Laughs]

JD: Yeah, yeah.

RC: And then, the legislature passed an act allowing counties to have an adult education program. And I went to my superintendent and asked him if he would implement an adult education program, because I knew many of the parents were not able to help their students with the lesson, and that would be better for the students. Well, he said, "No. I don't think it's in the best interest of the county to do that." I said, "Well, may I come before the board?" He said, "You can come before the board, but don't bring no doves."



So, I got two individuals to go with me. I got Mr. [53:17] Polk, who was the social science teacher down at Tchula. That's Marshall High School now. I got Mr. Curtis Lodge, who was the social science teacher over at Durant, which is Williams-Sullivan. And we went. And I explained to the board what I wanted.

And the board says, "We will have an adult education program when the superintendent asks for one." I said, "You mean if the superintendent asks for one, you will have one?" They say, "Well, that's correct." I said, "Well, next year, you will implement an adult education program, because I'm declaring my candidacy for superintendent right now!" [Laughter]

So, it was needless to say that at the end of the year I got a message, you know, that my contract was not renewed.

JD: You were out again.

RC: Out again!

JD: Oh!

RC: Alright, then, we were—the legislature was in session. We had two legislators. I'm running for superintendent of education.

JD: Yeah.

RC: But they get a "local and private" passed. Now, the "local and private" eventually—it has been ruled unconstitutional. You can't do it now. But they draw up legislation like "any county where Highway 12 and Highway 17 intersect may appoint [0:55:00] their superintendent." [Laughs]

JD: Uh-huh, yes, yes.

RC: And when they drew that up and got that *passed*, and I could not run for superintendent of education, and that's how, why I ran for the legislature.

JD: Ah, that is really interesting.

RC: Um-hmm.

JD: But before we get to that, there's something I really want to ask you, because in 1965 the Holmes County schools were forced to desegregate, the white schools. How did that affect you and your students? And how did that play out over the next couple of years? Was it successful? Did white and black students go to white schools? Did whites stay? What happened?

RC: [Laughs] No white students went to black schools. Some of the students had to pay the price, and they had to pay a hell of a price.

JD: Talk about that.

RC: One of the things we was talking about last night, you know, yesterday evening—planning for the civil rights celebration that we're having, we were talking about that. One young lady that went to school there—she later went to school with me after I got fired when I was teaching over at Saints. But she said, “Mr. Clark, you don't know how cruel it was.” She said, “I never will be the same again.” And it really had a heck of an impact on that particular young lady.

JD: What did she have to face in an all-white school?

RC: Well, she just said it was cruel.

JD: Um-hmm.

RC: And, you know, they were not treated like they were human beings.

JD: Yeah.

RC: And I remember over there at Durant, one young lady who lived in a rural area, Mrs. Georgia Clark's daughter. The superintendent suspended her from school one day, and she's

eight miles from home. But we gave him all kinds of trouble about just putting that young lady out. [Laughs]

JD: Yeah.

RC: [Laughs] And I don't think he ever did that again.

JD: Yeah. From 1966 to '67, you worked for Dr. Arenia Mallory as director of adult education at Saints Junior College in Lexington. Tell us about Dr. Mallory and Saints and your time there.

RC: Well, the superintendent, you know, fired me, okay? That was good. It really wasn't the superintendent. That was in God's plan, because I wanted an adult education program, right?

JD: Um-hmm.

RC: When I started working for Dr. Arenia C. Mallory, she had three hundred adults coming in six days a week, four o'clock, from Monday, four to nine, from Mondays through Friday.

JD: Wow.

RC: And then, on Saturdays, they'd come in for vocation from nine until twelve. So, when I went over there, she started me out as the coordinator of the program. Then, within about three months, I was made director of the program. So, that was God's way of moving me and putting me in charge of those adults. And we had adult education programs on Saints Junior College campus. We had some at the church in Lexington, Asia. We had a class in Pickens, we had a class in West, and we had a class in Tchula, also.

And one of the things about that. When I ran against J. P. Love and won, J. P. Love, one of his challenges was that I had forged signatures, said, "because there's one of my hand," that his name is there, and I know he can't read and write. But what Mr. Love did not know: that he

had gone to adult school that I was heading, and they had taught him [laughs] how to read and write.

JD: Oh! Oh, that's wonderful, that's wonderful! I wonder if we could take a short break here.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: We're rolling. [1:00:00]

JD: There were a lot of political developments going on in the mid '60s. One of them was Lyndon Johnson's Great Society. And out of that came the idea of the Community Action Board, the CAP Board that was supposed to be composed of local people who would be implementing various government and other programs. And you were briefly a member of that CAP Board in 1966. Talk about your experience there.

RC: Yes, I was a member of a CAP Board and, frankly speaking, that's when we had the first integrated meeting in the county at the courthouse, when we had blacks and whites sitting around the table. That's when we became a part of Central Mississippi, Incorporated. And we were fortunate to get two white men to sit around the table with us. But one—let me get off the point a little bit.

JD: Sure.

RC: You can get me back on point. But one of the things that I remember most about that night: I guess maybe a hundred gallons of water was drank out of that fountain that night by black folks, [laughter] because they had *never* been able to drink out of that fountain before.

JD: Did the water taste any different, I wonder. [Laughter] So, that was the first integrated meeting?

RC: That was the first integrated meeting.

JD: But I heard that you weren't entirely happy with what—the direction of that board. Is that true?

RC: Ah, I'm not at all happy with the direction where the board is going now. The—I see the Civil Rights Movement that started in Holmes County—we always said the cause is more important than any individual, and we're supposed to be working for the cause and not working for ourselves. We're not supposed to develop an idea and say, "I want to do this, and it's going to be done my way or no way." And if individuals, you know, cannot reach a compromise—and frankly speaking, I've got a letter drafted now that I have not had typed up yet that is going to come from me and the Freedom Democratic Party for Holmes County. And it's going to be calling on individuals, elected officials, in Holmes County. You either do your job—if you can't do your job, then you need to resign.

JD: Wow.

RC: [Laughs] You need to resign. And the CAP Program, it went well for a number of years. First of all, it started out as a social program to get small children used to being away from home, from Mama, before he or she went to school. Then they wouldn't be at school crying for Mama. Then, it gave individuals jobs who had never had jobs before. But one of the things I did when I was over at Saints with Dr. Mallory, at her approval, of course—we, with Rust College, developed a jobs program to have night school for those Head Start teachers, because I wanted those Head Start teachers to do more than just go there and babysit and play.

JD: Yeah, um-hmm.

RC: But, you know, that should have been done statewide, but it was just done on a small scale. Now, the thing—the Great Society that Lyndon Johnson started, particularly with the Head Start Program—if I am one thing, I know I am an educator. It may have been some time since I

was in a school, but I know I am an educator. And Head Start needs to be a pre-K school, a pre-K program, because children [1:05:00] starting to school, first grade, and can't read, don't know his letters, he or she is starting off behind, and they're going to always be behind. They ain't never going to catch up.

JD: The—you had mentioned that you were going to run for county superintendent, and then they made that, temporarily at least, an appointed office. So, you decided to run for the state legislature. And I want us to turn to that now, because this was a historic event. How did—were you approached about running? Did you volunteer? How did you get into the race?

RC: I volunteered to run. I volunteered to run. See, you know, I was an educator, and that's what I had wanted to be all of my life. And after, you know, I couldn't be superintendent, then I—the day after they changed that law, I ran against them out of spite. [Laughs]

JD: Yeah, yeah. Well, by this time, the Voting Rights Act had been passed, and there were a lot of blacks on the voting rolls in Holmes County. But still there are lots of counties where blacks are in a majority, and yet in that election you were the only one to win a legislative seat. How did you campaign? How come you were effective and others weren't?

RC: Well, one of the things—I present myself to individuals in a manner to let them know that I am one of you. I'm not no big I-O-U of somebody. And then, the next thing was the strong Civil Rights Movement we had in Holmes County. And then, the next thing was I got a chance to have contact with those three hundred-plus adults that was coming to the migrant school. For example, one coming in, you know, leaves the field and heading there and have a flat. And he would get there—supposed to be there at four o'clock, and he'd get there at five o'clock, and the teacher's giving him the devil. I wouldn't allow the teachers to do it. [Laughs]

JD: Yeah.

RC: I wouldn't allow the teachers to do it. You know, let's compliment him for getting here at all!

JD: Yeah.

RC: See, those were poor folks.

JD: Um-hmm.

RC: And definitely, and *definitely*, those three hundred-plus black folks that I got a chance to be the director of, they was a part of the group that helped put me over. Plus the fact, the strong Civil Rights Movement that we had, and many of the parents—when I taught at Lexington, many of the parents had heard their children talk about me, and they knew the kind of person that I was.

JD: You certainly had a strong reputation. Tell us about your opponent and the tactics of that campaign.

RC: Well, I ran as an Independent.

JD: Now, tell us why you didn't run in the—you decided—you *all* decided not to run in the Democratic primary, but to run as Independents in the fall. Why did you do that?

RC: Well, we could not—we could *not* be members of the Democratic Party. We could not be members of the Democratic Party. However, I decided, you know, to run *once*, because individuals that have never been to the polls before, you know, they may get tired of coming out.

JD: Um-hmm.

RC: So, just take your one shot.

JD: Yeah.

RC: So, we decided to run as Independents. Alright, J. P. Love and Wilburn Hooker—they had two representatives from Holmes County before, but the federal government had

intervened, and they had to redistrict and they had one district. So, J. P. Love and Ed Wilburn Hooker ran against each other.

JD: In the primary.

RC: In the primary. And J. P. Love won, and that's who I met in the general election. And he's the one that I mentioned to you [1:10:00] a few minutes ago that contested the election. He contested it all the way [1:10:05], and I didn't know until fifteen minutes before I was seated that I was going to be seated. Marian Wright was my lead lawyer. But he contested all the way.

JD: Were there any tactics of intimidation during that campaign? Were blacks free to vote at the polls, or were they being questioned? We see a lot of that going on now. You certainly got the vote out. You got the vote out.

RC: Well, in 1967, the blacks didn't allow other blacks to be afraid or be intimidated, because they was there. And we had not official poll watchers, but we had watchers or guards, as we would call them, at every precinct, at every voting place. And they knew that they was going to be protected if they came to the polls.

JD: And that didn't happen in some other counties.

RC: Pardon?

JD: That did *not* happen in some other counties.

RC: Oh, yes!

JD: And blacks *were* intimidated.

RC: Yes, yes, I know!

JD: And kept from voting.

RC: Um-hmm.



JD: So, you won the election. And it was—must have been quite a party that night.

[Laughs]

RC: Yes, I won the election. I—the first night, you know, that we had—I mean, the first time I ran, I was running behind, alright, and Cruger had not come in.

JD: Cruger is a precinct?

RC: Cruger and Durant. Cruger, that's adjoining the four-county line in the northwestern part of Holmes County. Well, I knew the votes I was going to get in Cruger. I knew those votes and I was counting those votes, and that wasn't enough to put me over. But, lo and behold, when Durant came in, I won Durant, and that put me over. [Laughs] And that's because of—you said you visited—we call him Jimbo Bruce.

JD: Yes?

RC: And all of his gang over there.

JD: Really organized, isn't he?

RC: That's right! That's right, and that's—I was trailing until Durant came in. And when Durant came in, it put me over to the top.

JD: Well, you've mentioned that—usually you're elected to the legislature and you go in and you take your seat. It wasn't that easy, was it?

RC: No, sir.

JD: Talk about the first day when people were being sworn in. What do you remember about that?

RC: Well, we went through quite a few lawsuits, a lot of suits, and Marian Wright was my lead lawyer. And the first day, I didn't know if I would be seated or not until 15 minutes

before I was seated, when Marian Wright came back on the outside, where I was on the south side of the Capitol, and told me, “Robert, they have decided to seat you.”

And then, when I went in, again because of my experience at Michigan State and Western Michigan University, being one black among a 121 whites that did not intimidate me at all, because I knew what I knew. And one thing that I knew, what I was going to zero in on, was what I was an expert in, and that was education. And I knew no one there knew as much about education as I did.

JD: But you had to wait a while. You were the—I think for about eight years you were the only black in the legislature.

RC: Yes, I was the only black in the legislature, and when I went in that first day, the regulations of the House was, you know, you had districts. And the senior person in that district would choose the seating for the rest of the members in his or her district. So, on this side, where I’m sitting now, [1:15:00] that’s the door where you come in, right in front of me, that’s the door. Alright, and this first line was two seats, alright, and then an aisle come between us, and that’s three seats. So, the old gentleman that was the senior of my delegation, he chose this seat for me, this seat for me, then his seat is across the aisle from me, then the other member from my other district, his seat across the aisle from me.

Alright, now, the vacant seat is for the Speaker of the House, whenever the Speaker of the House is not presiding. But the Speaker of the House had him another seat moved to the back of the Capitol.

JD: Now, this was Buddie Newman?

RC: No, that wasn’t Buddie Newman. That was John Junkin.

JD: Oh, okay.

RC: That was John Junkin. John Junkin. And so, I—

JD: So, you were separate but equal. [Laughs]

RC: I sat in that seat by myself without an opponent for eight years before someone finally sat beside me.

JD: Well, tell us a little bit about that those early, well, the first and second terms. Were you excluded from everything? You were determined that you were going to be a good legislator. How did that work out with all of the prejudices?

RC: Well, first of all, I couldn't get the floor of the House. If I would stand for recognition, somebody would make a motion. I'm already standing. He is supposed—you know *Robert's Rule of Order*.

JD: Yeah.

RC: But he'd recognize somebody else. They cut me out, and I couldn't get the floor. So, one night, this was my first term, I walked out. And Bill Minor—you know who Bill Minor is?

JD: Very, very courageous correspondent.

RC: Yes, and Butch Lambert, they came out. I had cleaned my desk out and had everything. And they came out and coming after me, and I pushed them out of my way and I reached for my door. And about that time, Bill Minor said, "Okay. Go ahead and do it. You're doing what they want you to do."

JD: You were just ready to walk out.

RC: I was ready to walk out! Walk out! And when Bill Minor said, "You're doing what they want you to do," and when he said that, I dropped my hand and walked back in. And when I walked back in on the floor of the House, man, they was having a hooray! They was wolf-

whistling, they was clapping, and they was doing everything! And when I walked back in, they got just as quiet as a mouse. [Laughter]

JD: They thought they'd won.

RC: That's right. But what I did when I first went to the legislature, you know, I had been in school, and that helped me. You know, I prepared myself on what legislation was coming up and what I was going to argue on. Sometimes I did just like I did at Michigan State or Western Michigan—I was sitting there, burning the midnight oil, so I would be prepared. And if they didn't agree with me, they knew that they couldn't say I was wrong, that I knew what I was talking about.

JD: How long was it before somebody asked you for your vote?

RC: Uh, [pause] maybe about eight years.

JD: Really?

RC: Maybe about eight years.

JD: It took that long.

RC: Yes, sir. And after eight years, we got the group in Jackson elected.

JD: These are a group of black elected officials to join you in the state legislature.

RC: Yes, sir. You got three from Jackson elected. They did redistricting and got them reelected. But after—some of those issues, you know, I would speak out on them, some of the technical issues, and I could present myself on them. And some of those same elderly white gentlemen that, you know, was opposed to me being seated—now some folks said I was being [1:19:54] for doing it, but sometimes they wouldn't know what's going on, [1:20:00] and when time came to vote, they'd be jumping up, trying to get my attention. And if he's supposed to vote "aye," I'd tell him "aye." If he's supposed to vote "no," I'd point to my nostril.

JD: These are your younger colleagues in the—?

RC: No, these are some of the *older*—

JD: Oh.

RC: *Older* white gentlemen.

JD: I see! So, you—that's a big change.

RC: The *older* white gentlemen. That's why some of the black folks was telling me that, you know, that I was being a [1:20:31]. But I didn't do them like they did me.

JD: Yeah.

RC: Particularly if somebody come up, like the gentleman from Vicksburg was real sharp; the gentleman from Biloxi, real sharp; the gentleman from Greenville, real sharp. And if they had something they didn't know, they'd look to me for me to direct them.

JD: Oh, that's so—

RC: But the truth is I never directed one in the wrong manner. [Laughs] And the first seat mate that I had was a white seat mate. Then, when it come up that he'd have to be [1:21:15]—if he's supposed to vote “no,” I'd say, “You're supposed to vote no.” And then, finally, he asked me, he said, “I want to ask you one thing. What you trying to do—get me defeated?” I said, “What you talking about?” “You're telling me to vote one way, and you're voting another!” I said, “Hell, man, [laughs] I'm trying to tell you how to vote how your folks back home *want* you to vote!” [Laughter] Um-hmm.

JD: Well, about ten years after you were first elected, you were appointed chairman of the House Education Committee. How did that happen? I mean, here nobody would talk to you, and now you were chair of an important committee. Tell us how—what had to happen before that could happen.

RC: Alright, that is very interesting. That is very interesting. When C. B. “Buddie” Newman was running for Speaker Pro Tempore, or to fill in for John Junkin when John Junkin got sick—John Junkin was the—

JD: Speaker.

RC: Was the Speaker. So, Buddie Newman met me on the first floor of the Capitol. I had been following a group of so-called liberals, my good friends, but they’d all get good appointments, and I’d wind up with nothing.

JD: Yeah.

RC: So, Buddie Newman asked me—he met me on the first floor and he said, “I need one more signature and I will have a majority, and can I get you to sign it?” I said, “Let me see it.” And I looked at it and I saw he needed one more. And I thought about—I was thinking about all these years I’m not following my other boys that I’ve been following, and they get appointed and I don’t get nothing. I’m going to look out for myself. So, I saw. Then I signed it.

And when I signed it, he dropped to one knee and he said—he dropped to one knee and he kissed that pen that I signed it with and he said, “Whoever thought that a white man would be on his knees to a nigger?” And I said, “Mr. Speaker, you peckerwoods are going to have to do a lot more of that [laughter] for black folks in the future!”

JD: And Buddie Newman was a segregationist.

RC: And Buddie Newman, Buddie Newman, um-hmm. And I signed that. Alright, then—

JD: You caught some flak for that, didn’t you?

RC: Then Buddie and I, you know, became—well, we could communicate.

JD: Yeah.

RC: We could communicate to each other, with each other. And then, after Junkin died, Buddie became Speaker. I wanted Buddie to appoint me as chairman of Wildlife and Fishery. He said, “No, I’ve got something else for you, better than that.” So, he appointed me vice chairman of Education.

Okay, alright, President Carter was elected. And George Rogers, who was the chairperson, he was appointed [1:25:00] to President Carter’s cabinet. Alright, Aaron Henry was convening the state NAACP Convention in Vicksburg, and that’s in Buddie Newman’s district. He lived in Issaquena County, but his district was Vicksburg. So, I went. Aaron invited me to be the keynote speaker, and I spoke and I told, “Black folk, it’s time for you to get up and do something for yourself! Don’t sit around and wait for white folks to be giving you a handout! Get up and do something for yourself!” Lo and behold, the next day in the paper in bold headlines: “Potential Negro Chairman Gives Black Power Speech.” [Laughter] So, I just knew it was all over.

JD: Yeah.

RC: So, about ten days, Buddie Newman sent for me to come to his office. So, when I went to his office, he had three boxes about that high sitting on his desk. And he opened up one of the boxes and pulled one of the papers out and said, “Take that. Look at that. I want you to see that.” I looked at it. I said, “Well, yes, sir, Mr. Speaker. I did. I gave the speech. I said it.”

He says, “What I called you in here to tell you that there ain’t no vacancy yet. But when there is a vacancy, I *will* appoint you.” [Laughs] And that really changed my attitude towards him, with him having the pride to override all those folk in his district and to do that.

JD: Yeah. Well, that—you know, that was something that I think [1:27:02], and that you did what you had to do to become chair of the Education Committee. And as a result of that, you

were responsible for, along with others, for pushing through one of the most important pieces of legislation in, I think, a long, long time, and that was the Education Reform Act. Tell us about—William Winter, I think, was governor then. Tell us about that debate and what the act does or did for the state.

RC: Alright, as we get into that, before that, a white lawyer from Lexington happened to call me and tell me what's coming up on the floor important, or I wouldn't know. So, I was trying to get on the inside. I went to the legislature as an education legislator and I had been pushing for education, progressive education. The first bill I introduced—when I went to Dr. King's funeral in Atlanta, they called the bill up and killed it that day.

Alright, then, after Governor William Winter became governor, which was great, and then, he—we worked out a bill with him and we put together a bill, Education Reform, we called it. And I would make sure that I would get my bills out first. You know, the bills come out and be on the calendar according to how they come out of the committee. But the Rules Committee had the authority at that time to rearrange the bill, the calendar, and they could kick the bill to the heel of the committee.

So, I met in '82, had meetings before we went into session, and we got our bill out the first week in the session. Alright, then they constantly kicked the bill back to the heel of the calendar, kicked it back to the heel of the calendar. So, getting near the end of the session, I got my vice chairman, who was a white person, and another individual, who was very conservative, but he was a white person, but he supported it. And we went to the Speaker's office.

I said, "Mr. Speaker, I came to your office to let you know that I'm going to call this bill—I gave the number of the bill—up for immediate consideration." [1:30:00] He says, "I hope you wouldn't do that." I said, "Well, the time has arrived, Mr. Speaker, for us to do that." And he



said, “Some of these boys can’t stand the heat.” I said, “Mr. Speaker, there ain’t supposed to be no boys on the floor of the House. [Laughter] And if there’s any boys, they’re supposed to go home.” And I shook his hand and I said, “I’m going to make the motion.” He says, “I’m not going to recognize you.” I said, “Thank you.” Then my vice chairman said the same thing. He said, “Mr. Speaker, if you don’t recognize him, I’m going to make the motion.”

So, then we went to the floor of the House and we began to, you know, convene. At the proper time, I stood and made the motion. “What does the gentleman from Holmes wish to be recognized for?” “Mr. Speaker, to call House bill such-and-such-a-number up to the top of the calendar for immediate consideration.” Rapped the gavel, “You’re out of order! You’re not recognized!” And then, my vice chairman did the same thing, alright, and he did the same thing to him. Alright, then the House got in such an uproar until they just had to adjourn.

But during that same time, I was seeing letters that one of my colleagues from Cleveland, Mississippi, had brought, white colleague, “what we’re going to do to your wife and your family if you vote for that bill.” I had seen a letter from one of my colleagues in Yazoo City, “what we’re going to do to your wife and family.” I had seen a letter from one of my colleagues out in the east, west Jackson, out in Clinton—that’s where he’s really from, Clinton—“that’s what we’re going to do to your wife and family.”

JD: Now, who was writing these letters? And these were letters to people who were supporting the Education Reform Act?

RC: Letters to people on my committee, who were supporting it. These would be from people back in their home, telling them what they’re going to do to their family. But they didn’t have no names on them.

JD: Yeah.

RC: They didn't have any names on them. So, then, at the end of that session, I went to Governor William Winter's office. I said, "Governor Winter," I said, "if we can't get some kind of support, I don't know if I can keep on putting my members through this bloodbath again." And he said, "What we need to do?" I said, "You need to take it to the people." I said, "You need to take it to some of the old-line organizations, like the Mississippi Southern Baptists, like the Farm Bureau." And he and I, we had that conversation, and that was the only conversation me and him had.

So, when I was campaigning for Congress in '82, and I attempted to go to his meeting he was having in Greenville at the Convention and Visitors Bureau, but I couldn't get within three blocks of that convention center, it was so many folks there. So, after he had those meetings, he summoned six legislators, three members of the House, and three members of the Senate, to their mansion, the Governor's Mansion. And he says, "I'm not calling y'all here to ask y'all if I should call a special session or not." He said, "But I'm calling y'all here to let y'all know I'm going to have a press conference." He gave the date. "And at that time, I will announce if I will call a special session or not." So, that was the essence of that meeting.

So, sure enough, Governor Winter called the special session. Alright, the Speaker, Mr. Speaker, summoned the same three legislators, members of the House, to the Lieutenant Governor's office. And the Lieutenant Governor summoned the same three members of the Senate that had met with the Governor. And they had a discussion [1:35:00], and their discussion was constitutionally, if he calls a session, constitutionally, we've got to convene. But the consensus was, among them, we don't have to do anything.

So, finally, Mr. Speaker said to me, said, "Mr. Chairman, you're mighty silent over there. What have you got to say about this?" I said, I'm talking to Buddie Newman now, "Mr. Speaker,

I serve at your will and pleasure. And if you have not removed me when the Governor calls a special session, I'm going to do everything I can to get a bill out of that House, out of that committee, and get it passed." And I turned to the Lieutenant Governor. I said, "Mr. Governor, and it's going to look mighty bad if I send a bill over there, and it ain't nobody over there but the news media and empty chairs." [Laughter] So, that was it! And he did not remove me.

And as the bill—there was a section in the bill where I didn't want any taxes. Alright, and then, after the bill passed both houses, we met in the Education Committee room. That's the Conference Committee. Well, if you meet on the Senate side conference, the chairman of the Senate Education Committee chairs, or if it's the House, the House Chair chairs it. So, I was chairing the Conference Committee room meeting. I called it to order. So, Senator Ellis Bodron, a blind senator but smart as he could be, you know who he is.

JD: Yeah.

RC: He says, "Mr. Chairman, gentlemen from [1:37:07], I suggest that we go around the table and see what parameters we are going to work within, and what we are going to take and what we are not going to take. And I suggest we start with you." Now, I hadn't thought, not one bit, on this thing. "I will not accept any taxes," and I went on to give my speech. And he says, "What about one percent?" I said, "I think—I will not accept *any* taxes." "What about one-half percent? I think the gentleman from [1:37:48] is very smart, and I think he knows one-half is taxes." Then I realized what I had done. I had put myself into a jam. So, we stayed tied up for three weeks. They was trying to kill the bill.

Now, Mr. Speaker, the first time he ever did this, he put the chairman of Ways and Means on there, because it was money. He always do that. Okay, that's good. But then, he put

somebody on there who was opposed to it. That's the gentleman from Grenada. [Laughs] So, he was trying to stack the committee on us.

So, after we had met and met and met for three weeks, then Mr. Speaker, Buddie Newman, says, "When you meet a long time on legislation like that, you have a tendency to kill it. If you want your bad bill, you better go ahead and try to work some way to get it out." But what I did not do—what I did, I still held out for no taxes, but I got with one of the senators and I worked out a plan with one of the senators and let the senator present that to the committee and let the senator give a speech on that, like he was talking to me. [Laughs] Now, I'd worked this out and I had given it to the senator. [Laughs]

JD: Now, why didn't you want taxes? I mean, this is a program—

RC: Pardon?

JD: Why didn't you want to raise taxes?

RC: Well, at that time, I felt that we had the money to do it, and taxes were just a way to kill it.

JD: Um-hmm.

RC: And if we was—you know, money for everything else. Why we can't have money for education?

JD: Now, tell us just what that bill did when it became law.

RC: Well, it—compulsory [1:40:00] school attendance.

JD: Now, that bill had been repealed around the time of the *Brown* decision, that law. There used to be compulsory attendance—

RC: Yes, sir.

JD: And then, school integration came along, and so there was—Mississippi, I think, was the only state in the union without a compulsory attendance law.

RC: It was the only state in the nation without a compulsory school law. We were maybe the first state to pass one and the first state to repeal it. I think we first passed one in 1924, if my memory serves me correctly.

JD: And what else did the new bill do?

RC: Early childhood education.

JD: So, it was kindergarten.

RC: Yeah, kindergarten.

JD: It was a bill that—well, you've told us how difficult it was to get passed, but just tremendously important, in terms of where the state was going. And, as the education person on the committee in the legislature, why, you were instrumental in making it happen.

RC: Well, yes, sir. It—you know, it was my intention. I had not—for example, one time before Governor Winter, they would—the Education Committee, 31 individuals, I was not chairman then. But they would get up to leave so they'd make sure we wouldn't have a majority. But what I did, I had my individuals, saw them in the cloakroom, saw them in the closet, saw them in the bathroom, and counted them. And when they got up and left, I went and knocked on their doors. [Laughter] And when I knocked on the doors, they came back, and we had a majority.

JD: Wow. That's politicking.

RC: And I moved that we would bring the bill to the top of the calendar for immediate consideration. I was not chairman then. Somebody else was chairman.

JD: Yeah.

RC: For immediate consideration. And I looked around and said, “Well, you’ve got a majority. Guess you’re going to have to carry it.” So, we got it out of the committee, and that was it. But one individual came back to the committee room the other day. When he found out that bill had been called, he got up on that table, and he walked down that table, stomping and screaming, just because that bill had been brought out of the committee.

JD: Wow. Well, thank you so much for going into this detail. This is important for the historical record. We’ve kept you long enough, but I can’t let you go without asking you about your two campaigns for the, for Congress, for the U. S. House of Representatives. What made you decide to run for Congress? And talk a little bit about those two campaigns.

RC: Well, the reason I decided to run for Congress is I wanted to direct Washington’s attention away from the way it had been directed down through the years. For example, you go through Louisiana and Texas, and you can see those plants and etcetera there that were built by the federal government. And I was going to be for the farmers and I was going to fight for the farmers. But I was not going to go with the mentality that nothing can come to the Delta that will hinder farming.

JD: I should probably point out that Delta planters had historically had a lot of political power in Mississippi.

RC: They had political power, the most political—two of my friends—I got a chance to meet both of them and campaign on the stump with Senator John Stennis in ’82, and they both were my friends. Jim Eastland, I got to know him. He was my friend.

JD: I think people—because of what has happened, it’s hard for people to realize that when you were running for Congress back then, there were a lot of important Democrats elected to office, and that they supported you.

RC: Yes, sir. Yes, sir. And when I ran for office, we did not have the districts that we have now. My district ran from down in Port Gibson all the way over to Webster County, all the way up and over to Webster County. [1:45:00] And then, even with that district, another thing that we found out when we did a study of the election, if we had had poll watchers at more places, at certain other places, we would have won.

JD: So, talk about the—well, there were racial tactics in that campaign. Tell us about your opponent and how he campaigned. Webb Franklin, who was—

RC: Yeah, well, Webb campaigned. He had, you know, a lots of money to campaign. I had just enough to get asked. But, you know, Webb, so far as I'm concerned—I'm the kind of individual that we can have different philosophies and we can disagree, and I don't fall out with you and get angry with you. And, you know, a lot of folk did not turn out in some areas.

JD: Now, why was that?

RC: In some areas, well, frankly speaking, right here in Holmes County, down in the bed of the Civil Rights Movement, I didn't get the turnout down there.

JD: Was that because of the Eddie Carthan thing?

RC: Yes, yes.

JD: Carthan was the mayor of Tchula, and he was accused of a number of crimes.

RC: Yes.

JD: And how did that play out into the election then?

RC: Well, it played out into the election that I was not coming down and putting my arms around him. [Laughs]

JD: You were essentially saying, you know, "Let the court system operate."

RC: Yeah, that's right.

JD: Um-hmm. And there were some folk who didn't like that.

RC: That's right.

JD: Did you think that cost you the election?

RC: That cost me the election. If Mileston had turned out the way they have turned out for me every other time I've run, I would have won. Got 49 percent plus, just didn't get 50 percent plus.

JD: Did you think you were going to win?

RC: What did you say?

JD: Did you think you were going to win Election Day?

RC: I wasn't sure. I never was. I was always, you know, curious. I wasn't sure.

JD: Well, this was an election that attracted national attention. And you're very charitable to Mr. Franklin, but I just found one of his campaign slogans: "Elect Webb Franklin; He's One of Us."

RC: Um-hmm.

JD: [Laughing] Now, what does that mean?

RC: Yeah, well, that's playing—that's racism.

JD: Yeah, um-hmm.

RC: That's racism playing to the white folks.

JD: I think another one was: "Do You Know Who I'm Running Against?" That was another of his slogans.

RC: Um-hmm. Well, that's another one, you know. But like I have, you know, there were white folk, and I worked with them. Alright, when I first ran for, attempted to run for Speaker Pro Tempore for the Mississippi legislature, I did not run because there were some African



Americans was not going to vote for me. And I didn't want their grandchildren saying, "Grandmama, Granddaddy, why you didn't vote for that black man?"

But the second time around, you know, I said, "I am going to run. I'm begging you for your support. I'm pleading with you for your support. If you don't support me, I'm running anyway. So, out of 35 African Americans, I got 17 of the votes. But I got 87 percent of the total vote of the Mississippi House of Representatives.

JD: Wow.

RC: And I got those votes. Those men and women knew that I was black, and they saw that I was black. But they voted for me as a person, and not as a white person and not as a black person.

JD: Yeah. And you had established yourself, your credentials, and they respected you.

RC: That's right. And during the time I was, you know, the Speaker Pro Tempore, there was times when they tried to get me to spend in the red. See, I was in charge of Fiscal Affairs of the House. If you put the money in the budget, we'll spend it. [1:50:00] But if you don't put the money in the budget, *we* will not spend it. [Laughs]

JD: Uh-huh. Just a quick word about your second campaign. You came so close in the first campaign for the House. Two years later, you ran against Franklin again. What was different in that campaign? And talk a little bit about how that went down.

RC: Well, the campaigns went very much the same. The second campaign we were—you know, we was better organized and we knew more about what we were doing. But the two campaigns went very much the same. There were several of the farmers in the Delta that, you know, tried to—supported me and tried to get the rest of the farmers to support me. But if the farmers of the Delta had supported me, I would have won, particularly the second election.

JD: I remember that election, and some of us were thinking that what was working against you was that they identified you as being with the Civil Rights Movement, as part of the Civil Rights Movement.

RC: Yes—

JD: And then, when you did have a black candidate eventually winning, why, Mike Espy, why, he was not identified with the Civil Rights Movement.

RC: Well, one of the things with Espy, though, we had changed the district.

JD: Um-hmm.

RC: We had changed the district when Espy ran.

JD: Um-hmm. And it was a much larger black district.

RC: Yeah, we had changed the population. The percentage of population was larger. We had really given him a winnable district. You see, I really, so far as—if you're going to take Mississippi, black and white, as it was then, with my district running all up into Winona and all into Webster County, [laughs]—

JD: Well, they had gerrymandered that as soon as it looked like blacks were going to vote, so that this would not be an overwhelmingly black district. Then they made it an overwhelmingly black district, and, of course, that made it more difficult for Democrats to win in other districts.

RC: That's right.

JD: And this is what we're dealing with nationally now. Well, I was going to point out that after that you came back and you continued to serve with distinction in the legislature. In 1992, you were elected Speaker Pro Tempore of the House, and in 2000 there were 35 black representatives in the Mississippi legislature, and that represents some progress, at least.

But before we let you go, one thing we haven't talked about is your family. Tell us about your family.

RC: Well, where do you want me to start?

JD: Well, I mean, you were married in 1971 and you had two sons.

RC: Yes, I didn't get married until I think I was 38 years old. I had [1:53:17] family here, my sister's children, and, you know, helped to educate them, and they're doing well today. As I said, my nephew that I raised here, he is a cardiology specialist in California, and he was the youngest cardiologist at the time when he graduated from the University of Michigan. And my great-grandparents were slaves here, and they bought the place, and my grandparents was here. And my grandparents, as well as my parents, always taught me that I was somebody and that an education was important.

JD: And you taught your children the same thing.

RC: And I taught my children the same thing. For example, you know, that's my wife, my first wife's photo up there. Sometimes there would be two dozen little boys out there. They'd be playing with different equipment that they had. But I had them to know that you are not any more than any of those little boys out there. But once they grow up, they're going go one way, and hopefully you're going to go another way. And I'd tell them that if you go the way I want you to go, I'm going to stick with you. But, now, if you go the way you want to go, end up going the right direction, you can be sitting on the big store porch at Ebenezer. I'll wave at you.

[1:55:00] But you're going to have to get out and take care of your own if you don't.

JD: Uh-huh, yeah.

RC: And they both did it, and they both are lawyers.

JD: Ah. You have been on the scene for a long time. There's a final question I am asking most of the people that we are interviewing. What have been the most positive changes that have taken place in the state during your lifetime? And what pressing problems remain to be solved?

RC: [Pause] I'm hesitating, not because of lack of words, but the main problem I see in the state of Mississippi now: We need to eradicate political parties, because we have government now *by* the party and *for* the party, and not for the people. And you have government now, if this party is for it and wants it, this one is going to be against it, and vice-versa. And our political parties, as I see it—and I have a right to believe in what I believe in, because I have been out there—our political parties is our greatest hindrance in the state of Mississippi today.

JD: It's sort of like it is in Washington, too, isn't it?

RC: It's like it is in Washington. If the Democrats want it, and it's going to make the Democrats look good, we ain't going be for it. If the Republicans want it, we ain't going be for it.

JD: Yeah. What's the biggest positive change that has taken place in the state?

RC: Well, the biggest positive change that has taken place in the state is that, you know, people are free—hasn't much change taken place, really, since the Civil Rights Movement. People are free to go where they want to go—go in any place they want to to eat and go to any motel you want to and stay. But the Civil Rights Movement was great. It was great. We couldn't have been where we are today without the Civil Rights Movement.

But I'm afraid—and I'm working on it right now—that if we don't do something, history is going to record that, for lack of leadership in Mississippi, all of the good works of the Civil Rights Movement died. And I'm working on that right now.

JD: Well, that is probably a good way to end, that Representative Clark has spent his whole life in public service, and he's not through yet! Thank you again for giving us your time.

This has been a splendid time for us.

RC: Thank you, thank you. Thank you very much.

[Recording ends at 1:58:24]

[END OF INTERVIEW]

Transcribed by Sally C. Council