

An Interview with

Ed King

November 20, 1980

Interviewed by

John Jones

Mississippi Department of Archives and History

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Interviewee: Rev. Edwin King

Interviewer: John Jones

Title: An interview with Rev. Edwin King, November 20, 1980
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Jones: This is John Jones with the Mississippi Department of Archives and History and I'm about to interview Reverend Edwin King. We're in Reverend King's car on the way to Meridian, Mississippi. And it's Thursday November 20, 1980. As I told you at the restaurant, Ed I wanted to start off if we could, since we are creating something for the Department of Archives and History, if you could tell me something about your early background. When and where you were born and early education or something about your parents if you would.

King: Okay. Mississippi family, I'm from this part of the state and so is my wife. Jeanette was born in Jackson and I was born in Vicksburg. We were both raised here.

Jones: What did your Daddy do?

King: My father was with the Corps of Engineers in Vicksburg. Which meant he had a federal job with the government in flood control. And Vicksburg in it's remembrance of the War, certainly it was "old South" but Vicksburg also with all the federal people there with the Mississippi River Commission, all the government jobs may have been more open in some ways then other parts of the state, I've wondered about that but I'm not sure. My mother was a house wife. My father came to Vicksburg out of L.S.U. in I guess the late 1920s and his family lived near Sheveport and were poor whites who had moved down into that part of the south from West Virginia - Ohio border area. So that his family originally were from West Virginia. And moved around the fringe of the southwest. He was born in Oklahoma when it was Indian territory and settled in northern Louisiana. My mother's family has been in Mississippi since it's been a state. Her family is basically from Warren County and Madison County. And some Washington County connections in the Delta.

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Jones: Are your parents still alive?

King: My mother is alive, my father been dead for about eighteen years. Mother doesn't live in Mississippi, she left the state in 1960. I have many relatives in Vicksburg though.

Jones: Yes. Did you start school and finish high school there in Vicksburg?

King: Public school in Vicksburg ^{CARR Central High School} and then went to Millsaps.

Jones: When did you start at Millsaps?

King: At a critical time, I finished high school in the spring of '54.

Jones: My goodness!

King: And started Millsaps in September of 1954. At a time when people were having to really question race relations in a sense knowing that change might be possible. So I was a ^{student} at Millsaps in Sociology but running around with people in History and Political Science Departments and other things. Watching the Citizen Council grow up and take control of the state and that sort of thing. At a time when any young people are asking questions. ^{Jeanette and I and} ~~At that time~~ all of our friends happened to be there at a moment when you could still ask questions about race in Mississippi. I think students a few years later, certainly in high school but even in college, students even a few years later were not able to ask questions because the ^{atmosphere} ~~atmosphere~~ had changed. There was so much hostility to open discussion.

Jones: What about your mother and father, how did they influence, what type of people were they? Did they, were they good Democrats or ...? Tell me how they...

King: They were what ever good Mississippians were suppose to be and would have been what ever that was and taken it for granted. My mother's family was fairly active in local politics. Her father had been the head of the Board of Education in Warren County, a Supervisor on the Board of Supervisors,

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Sheriff, and that sort of thing. Had a number of uncles and one aunt who were always in public office, tax ~~assessors~~^{assessors} or supervisors or sheriffs or aldermen in Vicksburg and Warren County and this sort of thing. But there certainly were no political issues, politics was personality and family. There were no issues.

Jones: When did you first come upon a consciousness of the racial situation in Mississippi was it at Millsaps?

King: In the early fifties, in my last few years in high school, I think everything was taken for granted that this is the way Mississippi was nothing could change. I certainly grew up in a family where you were taught to be kind to "coloreds" as opposed to other kinds of whites that you knew about that weren't kind. And charity and helping families that turned to your family. Vicksburg certainly wasn't plantation but there still were interrelationships going back generations between black and white families, that meant when black families were in need they went to certain white families for money at the time of a funeral or a wedding or an illness and you grew up in that kind of a pattern and that's what good white people are suppose to do is help take care, be kind, be charitable towards colored people and you look down on whites who didn't have that kind of paternalistic attitude. And my mother's family in Vicksburg were in the town but were always related to relatives out on plantations out in Warren County. But even there the racial attitudes were again out of the good middle class. In a society that was never going to change. When we were in high school, we knew that the Supreme Court was considering something about school desegregation and I heard a lot about race and discrimination and segregation and so on in the Methodist Church. And I have other friends I met at Millsaps, particularly in the Presbyterian

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Episcopal Church, all of whom were hearing the same kind of things that I was, that at least in these traditions and I think with the Disciples of Christ, the Christian Church denominations all of these were churches that had connections far beyond Mississippi, whether they were national or southern based churches. And the Youth Movement, Women's Movement and things like this in these churches, these groups were looking at the race question. So that I went to several conferences in high school where black students from black Methodist Churches would show up at a state wide conference. As I said, I know the same thing happened in other denominations and nobody thought that you would go to the same church back in your own home town. But at this level these things were happening. A black choir could come over, by the end of the fifties you could have a black choir come sing at a white church. You could have had it for fifty years before that ^{because} ~~but~~ society itself could never change so you could have little liberal things on the fringes. Yet everybody knew that real society couldn't change. But when that Supreme Court decision was coming, we heard about it in advance in church groups and we knew that there were some people who had differing opinions on this. Even in my public high school in Vicksburg there were high school teachers in Civics classes or American History or so on, that right now I don't remember exactly which, I still afraid to label many people, but there were public school teachers some of whom said, that the Supreme Court Decision was a good thing and some who said, it was not. And in a Mississippi high schools that spring what we talked about that May when the Decision finally came out was what it would be like when the first black students came to Vicksburg Public Schools the following September and our teachers were telling us this is the law this is the U.S. Government, ^{this} ~~it~~ is the Constitution it ~~is~~ will not be easy but we are Americans, That

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was the sort of middle-class Mississippi response. We laughed at the Jackson Daily News which had a front page cartoon saying "blood on the marble steps". Saying that, this is going to lead to violence and bloodshed. It didn't ^{have} ~~have~~ to lead to violence and bloodshed but leadership of a political sort failed from Jackson to Washington and the people below the level of elected leaders were afraid to do anything. The leaders ⁱⁿ ~~of~~ the church and the law profession and in colleges and education, those things kind of waited for somebody else to take the leadership and they lost the chance for any kind of moderation. Well, that was high school. I also remember a teacher in high school who dramatically told her class the seniors that she would not be back in September because she would never teach colored in her class. We left her classroom laughing and pitying her a little bit because she was in her seventies and had retired many years earlier and was brought back for special teaching and nobody heard any teachers in their forties or thirties saying, that they wouldn't do it. Vicksburg could not have been all that different. When I got to Millsaps there were people ready to ask questions. It was a confusing period, "What's going on? What does it mean to Mississippi?" But the idea that Mississippi might rebel against it or that it might not take place for ten or fifteen years was not there in the spring of '54. By the fall of '54 the resistance had developed as Citizen Council and those kind of forms. It was beginning to take over. Millsaps was full, not full but Millsaps had many progressive teachers, it had other teachers that might not have been progressive on social questions but were certainly open on issues like academic freedom. It didn't really matter what department there were people like this that would make comments to students in the diningroom, ^{seeing them} ~~sitting~~ on campus, riding in cars, getting a ride with a teacher downtown or something like that, we would talk about what was

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going on around you. In the Social Sciences and the Religion Departments people were particularly encouraged at Millsaps to ask questions and to really look at the society around us and what was going on. The last days of kind of old middle class liberalism was still there, the first few years that Jeanette and I were at Millsaps the interracial student meetings were still going on, those had gone on in Mississippi since the late 1930s.

Jones: With Tougaloo?

King: And Mississippi State and Old Miss, Under the Y.M.C.A. and the Y.W.C.A. kept fairly discrete but after all anybody on the outside would have said, "that's harmless, Mississippi will never change, what's wrong with a carload of students from Mississippi State coming to Millsaps for a Y.M.C.A. meeting and meeting black students ^{from} at Jackson State and Alcorn." ^{and Tougaloo} Two years later that was not possible. But I got there right at the end of that time and I saw the ax come down. Which made any feelings I had about the race thing easier to have because I could see the censorship and oppression moving in and I was at the right age to think if they don't want me to hear this I'm certainly going to hear it all I can.

Jones: Things began to get black and white for you.

King: Yes, With these interracial student meetings which were under you know interdenominational kind of sponsorship very loosely connected and started by the Y. in the state. By the time I was there it was sort of going along on its own. The students from the state colleges began to drop out and rarely be there. You finally began to reach the point where it was wisest to have most of the meetings at Tougaloo instead of swapping between Tougaloo and Millsaps. And I think at an earlier period those kind of meetings must have gone on on a variety of campuses in the state. By the time of my senior year at Millsaps the Citizen's

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Council had just about taken over the state. I watched that happen. I was a Sociology major. I went to I would say 90 percent of the important meetings held by the Citizen's Council between '54 and '58. I certainly didn't go to their organizational meetings in the fall but any major meetings in Jackson I would go out with students from Millsaps and we made notes on what was happening. We would travel around the state to meetings and watching who joined and who didn't. Or what minister would refuse to give the invocation and then secretly say, "I wouldn't do that. I would never tell my people I believe that the Christian Gospel means that we ought to have an integrated society, but I will not publically join the other side either."

Jones: Producing these statistics just for yourself?

King: Within the Sociology Department, observing but under the guidance of intelligent teachers who never tried to impose ideas but who had a grasp that the students ought to be aware and to be seeing things. It had got beyond the teachers and finally even at Millsaps some of the teachers who had encouraged us to go places within four years ^{became} ~~had been~~ terrorized and terrified. And they were afraid to go to places to interacial meetings that they had once attended.

Jones: For fear of losing their jobs or harrasment?

King: Any nebulus fear but the fear of living in the coming Facist age. They might not have known what they were afraid of but they were afraid. They were afraid usually so they could protect others. Protect the college, protect the Methodist Church, protect someother institution but ultimately to protect themselves.

Jones: But did the administration at Tougaloo fall victim to this reactionary situation?

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King: Eventually, it took a little longer there. Borinski for instance, if this goes into your record, check back ^{at this point} and see how much you want to use, but you better get it while I'm rambling.

Jones: Okay well let me tell you this before you start feel free to say what you want to say. What we'll do is I type this up and send you a copy and you can read over it and edit ~~it~~ out anything you don't want to appear in the permanent record. So feel free to say what you want to because you'll get to see it again before it becomes part of the permanent record.

King: Okay. Borinski kept things going with this intercollegiate fellowship which had originally preceded from the Y.W.C.A. work was pretty much independent by the fifties and Borinski was the key person there at Tougaloo in keeping these interacial student meetings going. And after the student organizations began falling apart as people just became afraid to go. Borinski kept things going hosting a Social Science Forum, a series and he realized that this was the last place in the state where any inter-racial contact could go on, so he got way beyond Social Science. So his topics could cover anything. In the ultimate of repression of middleclass academic life at that time even his forums fell apart. So that ^{no whites} ~~nobody~~ could go. We were told at Millsaps not to go by the faculty and administration.

Jones: By your senior year?

King: Yes. Even by faculty members who were long time personal friends of Borinski's and he does not know that it got that bad.

Jones: He does know.

King: No I don't think he does.

Jones: I've done five interviews with him. Being investigated?

King: For being a communist by the State Legislature, this kind of stuff, being bally-hooed around. He had made speeches at Millsaps. ^{Millsaps} ~~Millsaps~~ basically apologized for letting him speak on campus and collapsed but then came to

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us as responsible students, even to personal meetings in people's homes, much less black but even Borinski who is white. People would not even have him in their homes during that period because they were so afraid. They were trying to tell us as students that we didn't understand what was going on in the state and how severe it had become. The Forum Series pretty much fell apart for a short period and then was revived with Eudora Welty ~~was~~ willing to speak out there. Miss Welty is a saint in my book as well as a literary genius and she is a courageous gun-ho, she was involved in two of the critical, two of the first desegregated events in the state.

Jones: This is in the fifties?

King: By this time I think she revived Borinski's Forum probably spring of '59 or '60, somewhere along in there. They were closed as far as anybody from the outside participating in the spring of '58. He tried to in the fall of '58 and '59, he was finally able to get white Mississippians to come back with Eudora Welty as his speaker. But she is speaking in the "den of the Devil" the headquarters of the "communist conspiracy" in Mississippi, ecetera, ecetera. And what she would do is read like the story of The Petrified Man. A few years later she was part of a great conspiracy to reopen Millsaps and to desegregate the Arts and all of this in Jackson. The Southern Literary Festival met at Millsaps in the spring of 1963. Eudora Welty was reading "Why I live At the P.O." and there was an inter-racial audience. And that was the first, one of the first inter-racial audiences in the state after the Meredith rioting.

Jones: So it would be six months later?

King: It was in a time when oppression was increasing.

Jones: Right.

King: She is bound to have noticed and any good southern belle would have

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picked up her hoop skirts and huffed off the stage and refused to read to an interracial audience in Jackson, Mississippi in 1963, when the public line was you cannot have intergretion that is not forced by the government and any desegregation brings out rioting. And there were many middle-class whites who by that time were saying, well we wish things could change but if they are changed look at all the bloodshed therefore we don't want any change. By the time Eudora Welty in the mist of it doing nothing but being Eudora Welty was more radical than if she had carried a sign. Because what she said was, life will go on and she said it magnificently, And you can do normal things in the mist of a black and white audience.

Jones: Right I see what you mean.

King: Okay. How much of that belongs in open tapes at this point I don't know. Your the Historian you can kind of figure. Most of those things about Eudora need to be in there.

Jones: Certainly and I think she would, I don't think she would have any objections. Let me ask you this, was the audience at the Southern Literary Festival, was the intergreted audience, was that the one that Salter's talking about in his book?

King: There were several events that spring. And Millsaps retreated very rapidly once it became publicly known how decent Millsaps was.

Jones: He was not admitting Salter and his...

King: The gimmick at Millsaps was that Eudora Welty was speaking at an event that Millsaps was merely the host for the Southern Literary Festival which involves colleges from around the South. A few weeks later Millsaps Players presented a performance that was just Millsaps, people were not allowed in. In all cases at Millsaps, white faculty from Millsaps were involved, The English Department, people like Miss Goodman, again I don't know how long names go, she was involved but she would not have risk an

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incident that would have been embarrassing to Miss Welty. Some of these people did these things because they were ready, they had been looking for a way to help, people in several other departments at Millsaps were involved every move made like that and they welcomed it and they circulated and had teachers all over the place just in case there was trouble. There wasn't any trouble. I don't know whether they ever told Miss Welty. But there was no need to tell her.

Jones: That's right.

King: And it would have been inappropriate to tell her in a sense. She still had the chance to walk out. As a Mississippian should have, but she was a Mississippian like the others. Well things began to go back up from that point in terms of the academic world. And slowly people could ask questions again in places like Millsaps. Finally you have academic freedom in the rest of the places back even into Oxford and the rest of the state.

Jones: Yes, well let me ask you this...

King: I ramble a lot, sorry.

Jones: Yes, well my purpose here is not to constrict your rambling but kind of try to make a chronology of your experiences.

King: Okay back to the chronology part finished school at Millsaps in 1958. We had seen the repression we knew many families that had suffered. People who were small town grocers and ^{various} things like this whose families would not join the Citizen's Council and they were boycotted or suffered or forced to join the Council, even though they didn't believe in it. People whose parents lost jobs as public school teachers that usually meant moving from small towns to Meridian or Jackson ^{they were like} like refugees from the state yet. We knew ministers who were leaving the state. By the time we were finishing at Millsaps the repression had taken over the other schools and had finally

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took over Millsaps to the point that dormitory rooms were searched probably by students on behalf of the Citizen's Council not by the administration at Millsaps. But the Council was doing this kind of thing. Things had gotten so bad at Millsaps that professors who trusted me, ask me to inform on fellow students. And the fact that they would ask me to do something like that just showed me how much horror there was all around. I thought it was immoral what these other students were doing for the Citizen's Council and or the police and then the idea that a teacher would think that students could inform on other students only shows how desperate the teachers were. In this case teachers who made comments in classes about public issues found out that the comments were being reported back to the Citizen's Council. So that teachers who said that the Supreme Court is the law of the land began to wonder, is there a student in my classroom who did not enroll in Humanities 101, there's no such course, "is that student in this class to spy on me and to spy on the rest of the class", and the ^{degradation} ~~degradation~~ of that is that we probably never knew ^{if there was one student doing that,} who did it and then people were suspicious of three or four innocent people. And people who were honestly conservative and spoke up, people began to then think they were facists. And those who were truly facists were probably smart enough about it not to speak out. It poisoned the ^{atmosphere} ~~atmosphere~~ of learning. If a teacher had to hesitate, "what will be the consequences of what I say in an open discussion on my job on the college, will the college be closed, will the college be bombed?", and that were the things they said, what will happen the teacher would wonder, "if I start a discussion and Ed King and A and B and C and the loudmouths in this History class or Sociology class, the ones who still go out to Tougaloo, everybody knows what they think, it doesn't matter but what about John and Susan and Sally, what if they turn out to be progressive and they get

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their names on the list?" The people who went to the interracial meetings at Tougaloo found out that attendance was taken and names were turned in, parents were notified through some networks in the state, that your student had been involved in a liberal activity. It's all kind of peanuts when you know that nobody went to prison like in the Soviet Union and things like that. Ultimately it was not peanuts. I was planning to go to graduate school in the north, Jeanette was going out of school to Florida State, we weren't married at that time, and Jeanette was going to graduate school at Florida State that was at least in the South and I was going to Boston University. I had friends at Millsaps who were going to several places. I know of three friends in the spring of 1958 whose parents were contacted by the Citizen's Council wanting to know why their sons and daughters were going to graduate school in the north and it was advising that it was not wise for their sons and daughters ever to return to Mississippi. The police state ^{atmosphere} ~~atmosphere~~ was there long before you have the 1960s of blacks being illegally thrown in prison and beaten and killed and all of that but there was no decent white middle-class morality left to resist the Klan when the Klan finally came along. The white middle class, I don't mean to imply that other people are not moral I was talking in Sociological terms, the kind of people who should have prevented Neshobia and all the rest had been wiped out in the 1950s and silenced and eventually wiped out. ^{Let's} ~~But~~ cut it off a minute and I will give you some of my more paranoid things.

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Jones: We talk about 1964 in a while. Let me ask you this first were you always a Christian? Did you grow up in the Church or did you come to your religion in time?

King: I grew up in the Church you know Methodist Sunday School, Methodist Youth Movement, twice a day and it was the most important factor in my growing

up. You know it was taken for granted by... All my friends went to Church too. But the Church was a very progressive force then, within a society that nobody thought could change.

Jones: But you responded to the racial situation and to the repression that grew in the late 50s as a Christian?

King: Starting off in religious terms I was planning to go into the ministry from the time of late high school, came to Millsaps because it was the ~~best~~ Methodist school and because I wanted to be a Methodist minister. I was doing all the things you normally do if your in a certain pattern. And I knew ministers and I knew women, churchwomen who were active who had progressive thoughts on the race question. And then I saw these people suffering and I saw these people frightened and I began to see these people leave the state. So that at the time I could start off with a moral basis, never feeling like that I was a trader to Mississippi because I knew other white Mississippians who said, it's all right to ask these questions. Certainly a few years later it was not all right and I think the kind, the student generation which was in college by the time of the fighting at Old Miss and so on had not been able to ask any of the questions a junior or senior in high school that I had, or college. And anybody who had progressive thoughts didn't share them. My family certainly didn't, they certainly supported segregation totally. That was the way things were so that there were no influences other than, 'be kind to colored,' within the family. But with the people I was with at Millsaps the same thing was going on people were asking questions. Most of my close friends did leave the state after graduation and many of them never returned. And that was the assumption at that point if you thought differently and if you wanted to stay in the South you might try North Carolina but that might be your only hope of staying in the South. Many of them said, 'it's

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pointless we can never return." But the influence was not direct family influence other than traditional religious families.

Jones: So when did you decide that you wanted to in fact go into the ministry? Was that at Millsaps?

King: No that would have been in high school through Methodist Youth Movement in the state, so I was very much the pre-ministerial student at Millsaps.

Jones: And you started in, back to school immediately after your graduation in the fall after your graduation from Millsaps in 1958?

King: Yes. I went to Boston University for seminary and graduate school in the fall of 1958.

Jones: Had you married by that time?

King: No, I got married in 1960. That was a long time ago. We were engaged then, she was in graduate school in Florida and I was in graduate school and seminary. We were married my last year^{of school}, well my last year of seminary I stayed in school longer than that, ^{but} ~~because~~ we both wanted to return to the state and assumed we would at some point.

Jones: Then you kept up with the racial situation in Mississippi during your time at seminary?

King: Well I still had friends at Millsaps. And Jeanette went to school in Florida for one year of social work but she went under state scholarship she had work in the state Welfare Department the summer after we graduated from college. She was obligated to come back to Mississippi after her first year of social work, ^{and work} so she was back in the state by June of '59. And working here full time in Natchez in the Welfare Department. So we have lived out of Mississippi frequently and for long periods of time but have always stayed close in touch.

Jones: Yes. And you knew at the time that you were at seminary you would return immediately upon your graduation?

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King: I knew that my first year. As things got worse and worse in the state it began to look unreasonable. I met other people in seminary in the North who were from the South from other southern states, Georgia, Alabama so on, who were looking to go back to the south again but then again maybe we can go to Norht Carolina. But they too felt they couldn't go back to the Deep South. And we became involved in other ways. I was certainly involved in the racial thing. I didn't go North to escape it. In that I said I Went to a ^{northern} ~~Northern~~ seminary, you know it was not ^{parochial} ~~parochial~~, people at Boston University came from all over the country and ^{from} other countries. So that taking about problems at home was not that far away. And that particular seminary had always been involved in social issues particularly the whole University had been involved in race and had always had a number of black students. I was very active in other things particularly concerned about peace issues and working out my own relation to pacifism. I am a Christian Pacifist still or even more so, I would say now. But I can't define what that means at any given moment and I certainly wouldn't say what it means for anybody else. But I found the non-violent movement, the Gandhian Movement very attractive to my religous concerns of what it meant to be a Christian in the world and how you could have some dynamic string to an idea like ~~the~~ the love of God, loving people in the world. Other then sweetness and do good and be kind, Love had to be more then that if this was the love related to Jesus and the Cross and the Blood and the Lamb and I could start preaching in a ^{minute} ~~minute~~ but I won't. My preaching wouldn't be that far away from Mississippi preaching I just sort of I ended up in a different place. So I was very interested not just as a Mississippian but interested as a religious student as a seminarian in things that were developing. I was very active in the Fellowship of Reconciliation, which is one of ~~the~~ older interdemoninational pacifist groups in the country.

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And ^{had} ~~and~~ worked with them and I had worked with national church groups when I was a student at Millsaps. I had been out of the state several times even then. I knew that people from the F.O.R. this pacifist group were very active in Montgomery with Dr. King. Dr. King was a graduate of Boston and Jeanette and I would write about these things and talk about them. First when she was in school in Florida but seeing the South very differently from Florida. And me seeing the South very very differently from being in Boston but still trying to help each other figure out things. At Christmas time in 1958, I drove South with a group of southern students from the seminary. I was one of two Mississippians one was a black woman from Canton, whose father was one of the prominent black ministers in the state, Virginia Barteaux. She needed a ride South, several of us were coming and we went to Americus, Georgia, stayed there in Christmas time 1958 because there were no places to go, no motels you could go to, we couldn't have afforded a motel anyway. Stayed with friends somewhere in Washington, D.C. or the upper south and from there we went to _____ Farms, it was an interracial ^{Christian} Southern Baptist community, led by Clarence Jordan and his wife, remarkable people but were as good as southern as you could be, Hamilton Jordan is the nephew of that family, the brother of that family had been Mayor of Vicksburg when I was in high school. And here was just what I needed, Southern Baptists Christians who were pacifists who really believed in loving your neighbor who were into a Christian form of social community but they weren't Quakers they were not Ralph Waldo Emerson, Thoreau and all these New Englanders they were down to earth black and white southern Christians, raising pecans and had chosen to live a quiet community life and trying to show that you could have an interracial community pushing nothing on anybody else. And there they were and they were suffering, they were being attacked. I slept in a home that was cold because the windows had been shot out two nights before

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I got there. The " Squire of Plains" was never mentioned then and never mentioned by any black I ever knew of who works down there. Always that was regarded as the worst place for race relations in the entire South.

Jones: Plains, Georgia?

King: That neighborhood, with the most severe repression of blacks it was the place SNCC and Martin Luther King suffered their worst defeats, most violence and it was outside of Birmingham it was the one other area, it was notorious for burning black churches. Massive violence, massive police brutality, massive oppression and throughout the fifties and sixties, nobody ever thought there was anybody in the white community who said one word of decency. I have reread all the books and literature I could find of everybody who was down there. There were no white moderates. Especially influential enough to later be elected to the legislature. These peoples conversions if they ever were converted, are the times. Anyway going to Americus, and black belt Georgia and meeting Southern Baptist Christians, whose families were just like my family but who decided that the race issue was so important that they wanted to have their own community where people could sort of live a life meant a lot to me. We left there and went to Montgomery and visited Dr. King and Mrs. King.

Jones: The four of you all now?

King: There were about six of us. All of us being southerners. All of us knowing that this was crazy. I don't mean we could have survived going to visit Dr. King even though we had all the connections because he was a graduate of our seminary, had been there just a few years earlier and we had so many teachers in common and this ^{kind} ~~sort~~ of thing, I think it really took the Southern Baptists link in Georgia before we could visit the Kings.

Jones: And met him in Montgomery?

King: In Montgomery, he was still pastor there. Then came on to Mississippi that trip. Asking people always, how can we come back, what role is there

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as ministers
for us[^] in the South? And people really wondering, "Will you be tolerated, we know people right now who are being run out. Do you really think they will let you come back?" And most of the, I'm not talking about a lot of people but the handful of southerners that I knew who had gone out, just took for granted, "We are southerners so of course we can go back if we want to." There were others who said, "We don't want to because I don't want to fight. I don't want my teaching, my ministry, my professional life to be in all that fighting and it won't make any difference." So they didn't cop-out they just said, "I can't be what I want to be and go back to the South and do it." Others of us who were in graduate school said, "Of course we'll go back." And I don't think I really started thinking, it's going to be that easy, until that trip.

Jones: Yes. What did Dr. King tell you about the role that possibly you all could play in the South?

King: Well, that it was certainly important to come back and pleading with Southerners to come home as a Southerner. He certainly thought of himself as a Southerner, but also a realist. And I think I later understood he was a super-realist, he did not think the southern Church would be very charitable to people who upset southern morales. And call upon people to become involved in ways they might not want to become involved. I think among the pastors from the South who lost their pulpits because of their progressive ^{Racial} ideals was Martin Luther King, very soon after that he went off to higher things as ^{assistant} ~~assistant~~ to his father in Atlanta. He was forced to leave. He was pastor of a black Baptist Church which is next door to the state capitol in Montgomery. It would be as if where the bank is in Jackson across the street from the Capitol, the old Capitol was the black Baptist Church. But his Church was the status Church in the black community with black professional people in the congregation, many

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of whom were related to the few black businesses all of which needed licenses from the white world. Most of whom were related to the black professional class at the local black state college or the public schools. All of whom were massively vulnerable and had a great deal to lose that the poor blacks who might be fired from a plantation job, like Mrs. Hammer was, ^{for} registering or trying to registering to vote, she lost everything she had but it wasn't very much. It's hard to lose everything but if your going to lose everything it's much harder the more you have to lose. And I think Dr. King was speaking from a much more personal perspective then I realized at the moment. Later on, this is pretty personal, he also was saying, blacks and whites were not that different, churches are churches and that most churches are there because people want to feel comfortable and they have their personal problems in life and they want a minister who can help them, marry their children off, bury the dead, rejoice and baptist the newcomers and help you through the joys and triumphs and tragedies of life and shelter you from the world around you. And a Church which reminds you that as a Christian you live in the world, as God in Christ came into the world, not just into the Temple in Jerusalem is not a welcome message whether the church is black or white. I certainly know that in Mississippi the great majority of churches would not let Dr. King speak. None of the white churches and the majority of the black churches in his lifetime would never allowed him on the pulpit. Even the churches who've got his picture on the wall now. It was not easy when Dr. King would visit Mississippi to find churches. I never asked at First Baptist but you couldn't always assume the black First Baptist Church in a lot of towns would let him speak.

Jones: So it was a fallacy to assume that there was, that all blacks were taking a militant stand, willing to support his...

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King: No. People look back, I may be looking back with a jaundice view of history now, but people look back probably thinking better of themselves then they deserve to think and that may be good, I think it's still important in a historical sense to try and know the truth but it may be important to believe that you were capable of doing more good then you actually did, there is a value in that. So I had to wrestle with the problem but I was never alone. If any~~thing~~^{who} students who had the same kind of ideas that I had ~~that~~ went to Emory, or Southern University in the Methodist Church or went to a Southern Presbyterian seminary for graduate school or so on, may have had a much more difficult time then I did. People were probably a little more afraid to talk and ~~may~~^{may} not have been able to share their doubts with each other about what they'd do with their lives. I could. I certainly had wonderful professors at seminary. Some of whom were from the South but teaching at a northern school. That you could talk with. Our decision about when we would get back eventually was postponed. I went on to graduate school to get a Masters Degree and stayed on a couple of years hoping things would quote "settle down" so I could come on back and be a normal minister. Meanwhile I was agitating all over the place but not in Mississippi. Involved in things going on here but more ~~as~~ as an advisor or a consultant. I was careful not to do anything in Mississippi, so that I could come back. Okay we better stop.

Jones: We're at Meridian Junior College right.

King: Right.

Jones: We're back and it's about two hours later driving back to Jackson now with Reverend King. I believe we had left off when you were talking about your trip back to Mississippi back in 1958 with group of southerners coming down here ~~about~~ having visited with Dr. King. You came on back over to Mississippi at that time?

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King: We came on to Mississippi some of us who were on that trip, two of us stayed here in Mississippi and the others were going on to Louisiana and Texas. But I really had to face then the fact that coming back to the south, as a minister was not going to be that easy. My hope that things would change and the crisis would come while I was off in graduate school and could read about it. It wasn't going to be that simple. I guess for a year or so after that, I half talk of coming back and pretty so realized I couldn't and excepted it. In the summer of '61 during the Freedom Riots I came through Jackson, I would get back each summer to see family, and came through here for a Methodist Church conference, to do some assistance on the edges with the Freedom Riders in Jackson. I had been much more involved with the Freedom Rides earlier in Alabama. For strategic reasons did not join the Freedom Rides. Since I was coming up for ordination in the Methodist Church that summer and enough people were doing it at that point and I still was trying not to, I didn't need to prove anything. I felt very guilty as a Mississippian seeing all this going on and I helped with the Freedom Rides.

Jones: In what way? Just organizing them?

King: Well, I went on an experimental Freedom Ride from Atlanta to Birmingham to Montgomery about three days before the first bus, a black minister and I went through, And had no trouble, people were surprised when we would walk into the white waiting room, drink from the same fountain or use the restroom and leave. We didn't stay to prove anything but what we felt was that the average white southerner was not a blood thirsty monster who automatically kills. By the next week once the mob had been organized by Klan types, and we now know that the F.B.I. knew about the mobs and paid F.B.I. informers were in the mobs in Alabama beating up Freedom Riders. That level of violence was a relief to me as a southerner and to the

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minister who went with me who was a black minister. We thought white southerner just didn't automatically go insane at seeing a breach in the lines. But once whipped up the people did. Once the Freedom Rides got started in Alabama there were mobs. In Mississippi there were no mobs because the police took over in the name of the average person. We didn't need a mob as long as you had racism. I helped with some of the legal stuff here and I visited some of the people ^{at} in Parchment. I went in that summer, I ^{did my business} ~~visited~~ with the Methodist Church where I was ordained as a Christian minister but not a Methodist. The compromise being, the only person I've ever heard of, my ordination was valid to be recognized by those who recognize such things. The compromise was that I could be a Methodist minister, I could be a minister, celebrate the Communion but I couldn't vote in the Mississippi ^{Conference} ~~Congress~~, Methodist politics. When I got back to the seminary nobody ever heard of such a thing. You normally were admitted to a denominational relationship at the same time you were recognized as a Christian priest. I thought it was a pretty good idea, but maybe things should be separated for all Christians but for other reasons. Anyway I sort of behaved myself that summer visited Freedom Riders in Jackson jails and even went into Parchment as a visiting minister. And had lots of letters from parents and this sort of thing to get through. Then Jeanette and I went west for the summer and sort of said good-bye forever to Mississippi and I had a church or a parish, ^{at} poor rural churches on the circuit in Montana. Went out there and was pastor.

Jones: This was '61?

King: The summer of '61. I had one more year of seminary and three years of graduate school. I had one more year of school and planned to return to Montana and enter the Methodist ministry. Totally move to the Rocky Mountains. It didn't work out that way.

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Jones: How long did you spend in Montana?

King: Well we spent the summer there and had made the arrangements, we liked it there and they liked us. ~~We~~ had generally made the necessary arrangements within the church bureaucracy and so on to come back there and that was our plan to return to Montana, accept fulltime ~~employment~~ ^{appointment} there. I enjoyed ~~going~~ ^{traveling} around and meeting the ranchers. Same kind of church situation I would have had in Mississippi with three or four small churches. Except in Montana my parish was bigger then the state of Rhode Island and Delaware, But it took longer to get around to the country churches, but it was the normal kind of thing for a young seminary student to start out with. Another reason that I couldn't come back to Mississippi was that I had been very active in the Civil Rights Movement in the North and in the rest of the South, not the rest but in other parts of the South. I was involved with a group that help set up the sit-ins.

Jones: In Greensboro?

King: On the edge. The sit-ins were not suppose to start in Greensboro, but people have a way of doing things. They were suppose to start the next week in Nashville, around which there was great conspiracy and some of the people in Greensboro got some of the literature and decided as good Americans and human beings that they would do it. Everybody thinks that it was totally a people's movement, no conspiracy. I was in a meeting a year before hand where we practiced sit-ins. Did role playing, this is with Quakers and pacifists and so on, under chiefly under Jim Lawson who led the Movement as a Methodist minister and seminary student at Vanderbilt. Later he was a key Methodist minister in Tennessee in Memphis. But he organized the national student movement out of which the core of SNNC developed, rather then out of Atlanta. And so most of the leadership of the black Civil Rights Movement was more oriented to Nashville. People

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in Nashville had been planning for many many months a major campaign aimed at sit-ins and some of the folks in Greensboro had read some of the literature and moved on their own.

Jones: People in Nashville like John Lewis?

King: People were wonderful. John Lewis was part of the Nashville team, right.

Jones: So you had been involved...?

King: I was involved in some of the planning. When the sit-in started I was asked by Paul Dietz who's a Texan but was teaching in Sociology and Religion, Ethics Department at Boston University, he was acting under the Fellowship of Reconciliation and I was asked to go to Montgomery, Alabama and be a good preacher, minister, Christian, reconciler all of ~~th~~roughs things that I liked. And be a "go between" ~~bt~~ween the rival forces in the conflict, a peace maker. So I was sent to Montgomery where all hell had broken loose, white police brutality against blacks. Against the sit-ins there in late February or ^{early} ~~late~~ March and the last sit-in, the last student demonstration, Mississippi students not having any demonstrations, Mississippi was the only place in the South in 1960 that students did not move. They moved the next year, but the repression was total enough here. There was a ripple of movement, rippling the waters of the Gulf Coast but not much happened here in '60. I went into Montgomery where the students had called off their final demonstration when they faced machine guns, ^{mounted} ~~monted~~ machine guns, not even in hand that the police pulled up in moving vans parked in the streets of Montgomery, Alabama and opened up the back of the moving trucks and there had the mounted machine guns.

Jones: To keep them from sitting-in?

King: To keep them from picketing, marching. Much less getting any where near where they could sit-in. A lot of students had been beaten. This was near the time of Massacre at Sharpsville in South Africa and when we heard

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that Americans, American white military, white police were openly flaunting machine guns we could not get the press to even talk about it. We needed people to go in and so my role was to interview blacks, starting with Ralph Abernathy who was in charge of things in Montgomery, now that Martin had gone on to Atlanta and to be a "go between" between the black ministers and white ministers. I did that for several days and I had a number of very good ministers, particularly Methodist and Presbyterian in Montgomery. Leadership of some of the white churches who wanted to know what was going on. Who once they began to ask questions and talk after a day or so would even agree that the machine gun thing must be true although their first thought was, "my God this is ridiculous, this isn't going on", but they couldn't tell me to go back to Boston because I was a Methodist minister from Mississippi. Even though I was a seminary student, with Millsaps credentials and everything like that and I liked that kind of role. I set up meetings between black church women and white church women, only to misestimate the situation and the white women who came to the meeting had their license plates written down. I didn't believe police stuff, state stuff had gotten as bad as it was. People were afraid to come back. The white women were afraid their husbands would lose their jobs. This went on in Mississippi for several years, of people afraid to go to meetings, that somebody else would lose their job or suffer if you did. The ministers then began to get more and more nervous. I would have, I was setting up some meetings they never really came off, ^{the} meeting between the black and white ministers. I was also suppose to set up meetings between black students and start off with the Methodist student movement. I would have been working with people like Bob Zelder, whose name you'll come back to.

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Jones: Yes, I know Bob.

King: Oh you do, okay his father was a Methodist minister in Alabama. I never