

An Interview With

KARL WIESENBURG

Interviewed by H. T. Holmes

August 9, 1976

Pascagoula, Mississippi

MISSISSIPPI DEPARTMENT OF ARCHIVES AND HISTORY
Post Office Box 571
Jackson., Mississippi 39205

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This transcript was edited and reprinted in June 1996 to correct the spelling of Mr. Wiesenburg's name. All other content remains the same.

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Holmes: This is H. T. Holmes, with the Department of Archives and History. Today is Monday, August 9, 1976; and I am about to interview Karl Wiesenburg in his office in Pascagoula, Mississippi. I've already prefaced the tape with an introduction to this, Mr. Wiesenburg, so I'll begin by asking for a little biographical information, please, sir. Could you tell me when and where you were born?

Wiesenburg: I was born August 1, 1911, in Rosedale, Long Island, which is a part of New York City. My father was an Austrian, a pharmacist, according to my birth certificate, but, actually, he was a doctor who graduated from the University of Leipzig and had his doctor's degree, a Ph.D. degree, from Leipzig. My mother was a Hungarian, what is called a "magyar" and that's the race. She apparently met my father - they were both immigrants, he from Austria and she from Hungary - and she apparently met him in the new world; and, as I understand it, he was forty-five when he married her, and she was seventeen. I was the youngest of two children. We lived in - when I was about five, we moved from Rosedale to New York City, and I lived at 205 East 66th Street in New York City until I was eighteen years of age. My father died when I was sixteen, and my brother and I provided the support of our mother. When I was eighteen, I got the wanderlust, and, as I recall it, I passed by a coast guard recruiting station. The only thing was that I was looking at said the border patrol. I was always wild about the woods and camping and nature, so I decided to get in the, border patrol, and ignorantly enlisted in the United States Coast Guard without even being aware of it! The sea was something that was at that time quite foreign to me. Well, as I walked out of the coast guard recruiting office, they were hawking an extra on the streets of New York. It was then in September of 1929, and the extra was "Stock

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Market Crashes." I paid no attention to it at the time, even though I didn't realize it was the beginning of the Great Depression. When I went into the Coast Guard I was sent from New York to New London, Connecticut, for basic training, and then from there to Rockland, Maine, where I served aboard an icebreaker, the Kickapoo, which opened up the Penobscot from the sea to Bangor, Maine, a very interesting duty. While I was on board ship, I became interested in the antics of the radio operator on the ship and spent so much time in the radio room that they finally sent me to New London, Connecticut, where from June of 1930 to February of 1931 I took a course in communications, radio maintenance, and graduated from the course; and, in February of 1931, I and five other radiomen came to Pascagoula, Mississippi. At that time, I was nineteen years of age, going on twenty; and when I came to Pascagoula - at that time Pascagoula was a town of about three thousand population - there were fifteen thousand people in Jackson County, and they were suffering from the throes of the Great Depression. The conditions here were as bad, probably, as all over the United States except that we did have the sea. The people would shrimp and they would fish, and they were thus able to live. But I was very popular in Pascagoula because I was a radioman, a radio officer. I was drawing down the princely sum of seventy-two dollars a month, and in those days that was a fortune; and so I was a very much sought young man about town! As a result of an unfortunate love affair in which I was the "jiltee," I bumped into a friend who had taken the bar examination several times. He had his office on Krebs Avenue, a chap by the name of Dennis Maxton. To wile away the time, I helped Dennis with his studies and finally became convinced that the only way to help him accurately was to really find out what the questions were on the bar examination. Dennis didn't know or couldn't remember; and

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I told Dennis, I said what I'd do is I'd go take the bar examination and come back with the questions. I had no intention of practicing law, I didn't know really what a lawyer did. To make a long story short, I applied to take the bar examination, and there were several factors that even then in those days had mitigated against my taking it. One of them was I had not completed high school. Another one was I was, at that time, when I applied, I was not yet twenty-one, and the third one was I had never been in a lawyer's office, I'd never been in a courtroom, hadn't taken a correspondence course in law, and I was about as ill-equipped as any human being as you could possibly imagine to take the bar examination. Fortunately, the secretary of the board of bar examiners - his name was W. Harold Cox, he now sits as chief judge, or as senior judge, at Jackson - was the secretary of the board. He sent for me in Jackson, and, as I recall, we had a two and a half hour conversation; and Judge Cox hasn't changed much from that day to this. He was very sharp and very abrupt. He told me at the conclusion of it that he was going to certify that I had a high school education and that he was going to let me take the bar examination, but he also wanted to tell me that he had never had an applicant to take the bar examination who was less qualified and who was more certain to fail. To which I cheerfully responded, "Well, that will worry me not at all. All I want to do is come back with the questions. When I explained to him what I was doing, he laughed and he snorted and he said, "Well, " he said, "I'll keep my word, but I shouldn't." To make a long story short, I passed the bar examination with no more legal preparation than that. That is how I became a lawyer. I was - this bizarre story, incidentally, is factual, and it still can be documented because Judge Cox remembers the incident very well.

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Holmes: No doubt!

Wiesenburg: From there, I was still in the coast guard, and I could not get released from the coast guard, even though while I was in the coast guard I had my first experience as a lawyer with a case. It was my own case. I was court-martialed by the United States Coast Guard allegedly for unlawfully using the communications system of the United States Coast Guard for my private purposes. I had a friend by the name of Frank Riesley, and, when he was going out to sea one day and I was coming in, we had one suit of clothes between us which we kept in a closet, but fortunately we were the same size; and he told me that my clothes were in the closet and for me not to go out with his girl, as young men will do, and I replied, and some monitoring station in Washington picked up the conversation. They sent in a routine discrepancy report and instead of taking a summary court-martial, which was offered to me, I decided that since they had charged me with saying what he said and they had charged him with saying what I said, and since he pleaded guilty to saying what I had said, that I would plead not guilty, using him as my witness. Anyway, to make a long story short, I won my first case. I was acquitted by a military court-martial, which is a very unique experience. In 1934 I was discharged from the - I'd been sent to Wilmington, North Carolina, and I was discharged from the United States Coast Guard Modoc. I had fallen in love with the girl whom I married, and who is still my wife, so I had to have some excuse to come back to Pascagoula, Mississippi; hence, I left my sea bag on the deck of the Coast Guard Cutter Modoc and told them to "take what you want," and came back to Pascagoula, and I said, "Mississippi says I'm a lawyer. I don't know quite what it is," so I opened up my office. That was in December of 1934. I practiced law, as it was, from December 1934 until 1942, until May of 1942, when I went into World War

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II. During that period, I became very intensely interested, as all lawyers do, in politics. I had successfully backed the winning combination for the city commissioners at that time. We operated on the commission form of government and had three commissioners, and I was appointed to the port commission, where because of my supposed marine experience, I was immediately elected as president of the port commission. At that time they had made a very thorough study of the ports of the United States. Pascagoula had no port. Gulfport had a relatively minor port with only several hundred thousand tons of shipping a year, but even it was not really a port, in the sense of the ports of the world. I found out what was wrong with that setup, but before I could do too much about it the war broke out; and I spent four years, until 1946, in the United States Army, where I rose from the rank of recruit and I was discharged as a captain in the Signal Corps. All of my overseas experience was in combat in the Signal Corps, and I came on back to the United States; and, as I say, I resumed my practice in the early part of 1946. From there on, from '46, roughly, until '55, I had the normal practice of a small town country lawyer, but I kept up my enthusiasm in regard to the development of the Pascagoula port. I served as City Attorney of Pascagoula twice during that period. I served as City Attorney of Ocean Springs, and I was very active as far as the Pascagoula Port Commission, which was the city port commission at that time. In 1955, I came to the conclusion that there was no way of getting the local authorities - and by local authorities, I'm referring to the city and the board of supervisors - to get into the port business and to implement the port business, unless there was broad legislation enacted to get the county into port operation, with the intent also of getting the state into the operation, as was in most states which had effective port authorities. I ran in a way in

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1955 that I don't think Jackson County had ever seen before., I had a radio program, weekly, during - first of all, I did everything backwards. Instead of waiting until the time to qualify to start my campaign, I started it in January. I ran a weekly radio program and told the people exactly what I proposed to do if I got in the legislature. I kicked all the sacred cows in the county very heavily; and, finally, by the time I qualified, I had the opposition of the board of supervisors and every elected official in the county, with the single exception, as I recall, of my old friend Norman Lyons, the tax assessor. All the rest of them were unanimous in the fact that this upstart, this Yankee, must not go to the legislature. People take strange quirks in politics; and the more the establishment of that day fought my election, the more popular I got, and finally I won an emphatic first primary victory, and I found myself elected to the legislature. In the meantime, with my usual certainty of the result that was going to be accomplished, I had already obtained the court laws of every sea port in the United States, and I wrote a bill that put all of what I thought were the best features and the broadest authority into the one bill. That bill, which was the first bill introduced into the legislature in January, 1956, was adopted in April of 1956. The Jackson County Port Authority Act was the foundation that led to all of the development that has taken place in Jackson County. If you'll listen to political speeches in Jackson County, you'll hear of every politician under the sun taking credit for the industrial expansion that has taken place. As a practical proposition, I joined in praising all of them, because that was the easiest way to get them interested in it; but the truth of it was the board of supervisors actually fought the port authority act for the reason that I put an impartial group of citizens in between them and the contracts and the money; and they didn't particularly care for that at that time. The Jackson County Port Authority

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Act in turn led to the State Port Act, and the State Port Act in turn led to the Inland Ports Act, and most of that legislation is still on the books, and as far as Jackson County is concerned, we have used it to bring in Standard Oil, Coastal Chemical, Mississippi Chemical. We used that same legislation by amendment to keep Litton here, to build the shipyard of the future here; and the state has a very heavy investment in Jackson County, but Jackson County has made a very heavy return in sales tax and other taxes to the state. Now, I've continued in this rambling fashion simply to bring you up to date, to how I got into the legislature.

Holmes: I would not call it rambling. You've put it together very well. When you ran for the legislature, was the opposition of the local elected leaders public or covert?

Wiesenburg: Oh, it was public and vicious. The leading political - and I'm using names here because this is history and archives, and I say this without any bias, either, because some of these men contributed a great deal to the progress of Jackson County. One of the men was Hermes Gautier, who is a member of the prominent Gautier family here and who was, at the time I ran, with Mr. W. B. Herring, who was president of the Pascagoula-Moss Point Bank, and with Guy Krebs, who was the sheriff of Jackson County, and the coterie that revolved around, particularly, around the Pascagoula-Moss Point, they were the political leaders of the day. Hermes was very adamant that I was not to be elected to the legislature. Guy Krebs, who had been the sheriff, was running his deputy sheriff who was just finishing his term of sheriff for the legislature, and this sheriff was a very fine person. His name was Leo Byrd, one of the finest of men, actually, I've known. He was very popular, he was a native - the Byrds have been living in Jackson County since before the War Between the States. He was a good man. As a matter of fact, he's serving

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now as justice of the peace here in this district. On the other hand., I was just as unpopular as he was popular. I had a reputation of being very arrogant, very brusque, not one who is a backslapper. The most frequent thing that was said during the campaign - and I'm not going to use the language, actual language that was used - but, in a sense, what developed was sort of a ground swell. "Well, I don't like Wiesenburg, but I'm going to vote for him because he's qualified." And that, strangely enough, defeated a very popular man.

Holmes: That's unusual logic in Mississippi.

Wiesenburg: It is unusual logic, but as I say, I ran an unusual campaign. Rather than talking about my opponent, which I did, I talked about what I proposed to do and what could be done for Jackson County and for Mississippi, with some vision and some leadership. I think I sold the message. Then I did another thing which I had learned from Mississippi's politics: Instead of dealing with my opponent, I mocked the people who were supporting him. I would pick them out when I was on the stand, and I'd say, "I see Mr. Herring right there." I said, "Mr. Herring is sitting here, and if you would go up and ask him, he'd tell you "Don't vote for Wiesenburg and I'll tell you why." See. I had picked that technique up from Huey Long. I was an admirer of Huey's political approach and his politics, and he used that very effectively, and the crowds liked that. Television, at that time, was unknown, the political rally was their outlet to get their vicarious kicks; so you had to be a showman, you had to be a combination of a buffoon, and yet at the same time you had to be able to talk on your feet and to be able to answer questions when they were asked. That was the atmosphere of that day. I went up to the legislature as a renegade from Jackson County. When I arrived in the legislature, I continued my role as a renegade.

Holmes: I would think that the qualities you just outlined would, though, stand you in good stead in the Mississippi legislature.

Wiesenburg: The Mississippi legislature in 1956, and I'm speaking from what I observed, was a hierarchical system, the top of which was Walter Sillers. Walter had a half dozen of his intimate friends, and we facetiously referred to them as the "inner guard." They in turn ran the caucus - the Sillers caucus system - and they would hold meetings before the legislative meetings, and in those meetings they'd go over every bill, and they would decide which bills they were going to enact and which bills they were going to defeat. If you were not a member of the caucus, you would be just sitting in that legislature, and when any bill came up, you'd be whistling "Dixie" as far as your position on the bill and the effort that you could get to influence the legislation. It was an unbelievable system because each legislator in the caucus system abdicated his role as a legislator and swore fealty to Walter and voted - as the expression was, "Walter had all the buttons wired," so that when he voted "aye" everyone voted "aye" and when he voted "nay" everyone voted "nay."

Holmes: Would you say that you were...well, obviously, I think philosophically, you were opposite Mr. Sillers.

Wiesenburg: In some respects. I want to make this clear. I had a great admiration for Walter Sillers. Walter Sillers was in stature hands above those that were around him, his cohorts. Most of the people in that era, time, that went to the legislature were farmers, teachers, lawyers, people as a general rule that either wanted the honor of being a legislator or else in most cases were running because some particular group had sponsored them in running. The insurance companies always had their people, the banks had their people, the utilities had their people, you could go on down the line. Every one of the

so-called vested interests had some representative that he had in his pocket, and they, frankly, I think, at times outnumbered the rest of us. I think those of us who went up there to represent the people were rather few and far between. For example, it's still true in the legislature, your insurance committee generally will be headed by an insurance agent, your public utilities commission will be generally headed by someone who is very close to the public utilities. And you can go on down the line with that, and the fact is that most reform bills in the legislature that are enacted to regulate a particular business or profession or industry wind up being written by the people who are going to be regulated, and, if they are not acceptable to them, they will not pass the legislature. I don't think that's any different now than it was. Yet, getting back to Walter, Mr. Sillers, I made it a point of never saying anything more to Mr. Sillers than, "Good morning, Mr. Sillers," when I met him coming on in. In the evening going out, I'd always say, "Good evening, Mr. Sillers." That was the full extent for six years of my total conversation with the Speaker, which was heresy in the house, because if anyone had any legislation they wanted adopted, they had to get the blessing of the Speaker, he had to know what it was about and he had to approve it. I never had any difficulty getting my legislation enacted, even though I was a renegade, because I studied the system until I knew both its strengths and its weaknesses. As you know, in the legislature the way they operate, the committee system, the committees theoretically have all the power in the house. All the chairmen of the committees under the Sillers system were members of the outer guard, or the inner guard, depending on the importance of the committee. He controlled the rules committee, he appointed all the chairmen of the various committees, and they were all his henchmen, sworn to fealty. No legislation could be enacted in that

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legislature unless Mr. Sillers wanted it enacted, not even if the governor put his full strength behind it. He was more important than the governor. He was more important than the legislature itself, because he was the legislature. The judiciary also took a subservient role. While Walter Sillers was Speaker of the house, he was indeed the most powerful man in Mississippi. Now, I mentioned the fact that I had no trouble getting my legislation enacted. To start with, the Jackson County Port Authority Act was so involved when I introduced it that none of the legislators would admit that they didn't understand it. Consequently, none of them openly opposed it. The Ingalls Shipbuilding Corporation forced the board of supervisors here to endorse the legislation, because they recognized the fact that under that legislation they would get deep water; and, if they got deep water, they would get increased contracts. That was the reason why this legislation was enacted. It passed the house unanimously - no, there was one vote against it, Joe Wroten.

Holmes: You had mentioned that earlier. What was Representative Wroten's opposition to the bill?

Wiesenburg: Representative Wroten was in favor of industrializing Washington County, but he felt that my bill was unduly enhancing. The bill exactly as introduced was a local bill which affected only Jackson County. When I wrote the bill, I invited Harrison County to join in the bill, and Harrison County - Upton Sisson and Danny Guice, as I recall., were the representatives from Harrison County at the time. Upton Sisson was the floater representative, Danny Guice, who was later mayor of Biloxi, finally decided that they did not want to put Harrison County under the terms of the bill because they were afraid it would put too much power in the hands of their board of supervisors. Consequently, only Jackson County went under the Jackson County Port

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Authority Act. In 1958, we already had made such great strides underneath the bill that the Harrison County legislators came to me, and I wrote some amendments to the bill which put Harrison County under the act. Subsequently, I wrote another amendment which put Hancock County under the act. Then we wrote the State Port Act in the 1958 session. Section Nine of the State Port Act gave all the powers that were conferred upon Jackson County in the Jackson County Port Authority Act to all of the port authorities and all of the port commissions in the state of Mississippi. That's the so-called Russell Fox amendment which he insisted on and which I was only too glad to give him, because it became a general bill, then, of state-wide application.

Holmes: What I was getting around to a while ago when we started discussing Walter Sillers: I've talked to several people that were members of the legislature at one time, or still are, who served under Walter Sillers and people who were very thick with him and people who had little to do with him out of their choice; but I've been amazed to find that no one, actually, had unkind things to say about Walter Sillers. And I'm just amazed that a man could accumulate such power and not make enemies.

Wiesenburg: Well, Walter's stock in trade was his fairness. In other words, Walter could cut your throat wide open, but do it in such a fair and open-handed manner that you wouldn't really resent it. I'll give you an illustration. In the beginning of the '60 session, I wanted to continue my fight to change the rules of the house. One of the worst rules of the house is that the Speaker, of course, not only appoints all the chairmen of all the committees, but he also appoints the rules committee; and it seemed to me to be the much more democratic method of letting the members of the rules committee be elected from the various congressional districts, a move which the Sillers faction

fought tooth and toenail. In the beginning of the '60 session, Joe Wroten, I and....

(End of Side One)

...Michaels from Kosciusko, Ed Jolly from Columbus and several others got together in my suite at the Robert E. Lee, and we laid out the strategy for putting in a rules change. Walter Sillers....

Holmes: Now, was this the Wiesenburg Caucus?

Wiesenburg: This was the "telephone booth" caucus, the famous telephone - the reason they called it the "telephone" caucus, Bill Minor gave it that name because the Wiesenburg caucus could fit into a telephone booth! There's an odd thing about that that I'll mention in just a minute. The results of this, the rumors of this got to Walter's ears - rumors my foot, because Bill Minor and other newspaper men picked it up and they said, "The Sillers revolution is here! Finally someone is going to rebel against the Great White Father." And Walter and his cohorts got real alarmed, and they sent out a call for their adherents to meet at the old Edwards Hotel, and 127 out of 140 legislators of the house showed up; and all of them signed a petition and swore a dying fealty to the Speaker that they would resist any change in the rules whatsoever, no matter what it might be, see. Well, when the time came, time for the rules, Russell Fox came to see me - Russell and I had always been friendly - and he said that Mr. Sillers felt that even though he was going to oppose the rules, and even though they had all the votes, that we should be given a full and ample hearing to air our views, see. Well, we started with our arguments which were as persuasive as could be. As a matter of fact, George Rogers, who is now serving as chairman of the education committee who was not a party to the telephone booth caucus meeting, bolted and jumped the tracks and got up, and he told them, he said,

"Well," he said, "I haven't had any part of this, but I'm convinced that this needs to be done to make this a democratic house, because what we have done, we have simply abdicated our rights and given them to the Speaker; and even if he is a benevolent dictator, we ought to return to democracy." Well, anyway, the 127 votes stayed solid. I think we had actually nine votes in favor of our resolution. I made a prediction from the floor of the house when I made a motion to reconsider the vote by which the resolution - I said, "Believe me, before this session of the legislature is ended, you will change at least one of your rules." And I lived to see that prophecy come true. They had to change a rule because - I had studied the parliamentary procedure down to the point that some of it was so antiquated and so stupid, still is, that it just didn't make sense. They haven't modernized the operation of the Mississippi legislature since the constitution of 1890, and it is so cumbersome and so outmoded, it's a wonder they get as much business done as they do. This particular rule change - Stone Barefield had a fish and game bill, and Stone was on the losing side; so Stone came to me because I had achieved the reputation of being a parliamentarian and asked me if there was anything he could do to defeat the bill. I told him, I said, "Stone, let me ask you something. How many of the committee on engrossed bills are in favor of the bill?" And he said, "They're all against it, they're all my friends." I said, "That's fine. You listen to what I say. Tell all three of them to leave Jackson, get out of the chamber and - tell them not to go home, not to be found - and then when the bill comes up for final passage, get up and make a motion that the bill be engrossed." So, Stone followed that scenario to a "T," and when he did, of course, Mr. Sillers was an able parliamentarian, and he said, "The house will stand in recess, and we will call the - we will convene the committee on engrossed bills to engross the bill." And the

committee was nowhere to be found. This went on for a couple of days while they were trying to find the committee. Finally, the rules committee went out and came in with a new rule and changed the rules. So, I lived to see my prophecy come true.

Holmes: I think Stone Barefield studied your methods pretty thoroughly, because he can manipulate them....

Wiesenburg: Stone is an excellent parliamentarian.

Holmes: He is. I enjoyed watching him work.

Wiesenburg: At heart he's another renegade. He appears to be an ultra-conservative in the old school, but actually Stone is very sympathetic to the trials and tribulations of the average man, which is a lot more than you can say about many of the legislature. Stone, in my opinion, is one of the better legislators. Of course, the two outstanding men that are still serving in the legislature are Charlie Deaton and Sonny Merideth. These two are real, in my opinion, real outstanding men.

Holmes: During the six years that you only said good morning and good evening to Mr. Speaker, what type of committee assignments did you get?

Wiesenburg: That was the strange part about it. In my first four years, I voted for Bill Winter for Speaker of the house against Walter Sillers, and there were forty of us who had voted for Bill, and we were known as "the forty outcasts." Since I committed the unpardonable sin of voting for Bill Winter after Walter had already defeated him - since my name was "W" and we voted by voice, and I was at the end of the row, and I just as easily could have voted for Mr. Sillers - by that time he had been elected by an overwhelming majority. But I cast my vote for Bill, and Mr. Sillers paid me accordingly. We had some committees that never functioned, that never served, and he appointed me to those committees. By that time, I became aware of the

advantages and disadvantages of the committee system. So I said, "Fine." So I never attended any of the meetings of my committees. What I did is I simply read every bill that was introduced in the legislature, and those that the Sillers faction was interested in, I read with great care. Invariably, when a bill was introduced, I would come up with an amendment to the bill that was so logical that they couldn't find a good reason to defeat it, see, and the amendment would go into the bill; and it was only after the bill was finally written that they realized really what the amendment did. Well, that went on for some while, and finally, they had - one of their particular bills, someone came to me and said, 'Well the Sillers caucus has paid you a compliment, Wiesenburg. What they did is they said that any amendment that you proposed, they agreed to vote it down, no matter how good it sounds.' I said, "they did?" So, when the bill was called up, I went to the desk and I told the clerk, "Let me take a look at the bill and the amendments." Among the amendments was an amendment of George Payne Cossar, which was a key amendment to the bill, because the original bill didn't go as far as they really wanted it to. I took Cossar's amendment to one of the clerks, and I had her type out another amendment word for word, comma for comma, and put my name on the amendment and put it in front of Cossar's amendment and put the bills back on the desk. Of course, no one ever looks at those things, so, lo and behold, right after the committee amendments they called up Amendment No. 1 by Mr. Wiesenburg. The clerk read the amendment which no one paid any attention to, called for a vote and a resounding chorus of "nays" - what do you call it - and the Speaker said, "The nays have it." I got up and made a motion to reconsider the vote by which the amendment had been defeated, and I said, 'Mr. Speaker, this amendment is absolutely necessary to perfect this bill. If this amendment is defeated,' I

said, "the bill will have lost its meaning." And they voted my motion to reconsider the bill with another resounding no. Subsequently, the Cossar amendment came up, and, when they finished reading the Cossar amendment, they started to take a vote, and I got up with a point of order. I said, "Mr. Speaker," I said, "that amendment is word for word, comma for comma and period for period identical with Wiesenburg Amendment No. 1, which was voted down by the house. So they had a big conference, got carbon copies of the thing. So Walter says, he says, "Well, I'll entertain a motion to reconsider the vote by which Mr. Wiesenburg's amendment was defeated." I said, "Mr. Speaker, I call to your attention that I made a motion to reconsider, the motion to reconsider was voted down, and under the rules of the house the amendment is not germane and cannot be called up again." So they had to send the bill back to committee. Walter, after that, failed to wish me good evening.

Holmes:

And he failed to give you a decent committee assignment.

Wiesenburg:

Oddly enough, Walter did everything in his power to get me to come on his bandwagon. I said that he didn't talk to me, that we always said that for six years. In my second term of office he gave me some excellent committee assignments: County affairs, I was vice chairman of municipalities, and I was on several excellent committees. But, I adhered to my usual method. I never attended any of them, because I found the way that the - under the Sillers method of operation - that the committee method was merely a rubber stamp. What I did, I developed an amendment service and a drafting service. I would offer to draft - getting bills drafted in that legislature by these legislators is a difficult business, because they've got to go to the attorney general, or they've got to go to someone who can couch the legislation in the approved form. If it's a statute being amended, the amendment has got to be

in the precise form, so I set myself up as a legislative draftsman, and I ran one of the busiest, had one of the busiest desks in the legislature. There was always someone coming to me to draft an amendment, to draft a bill. While I was doing it, if I thought there was something good in the bill and it was a bill I could put Jackson County into, I always put Jackson County into it. I built up quite a popularity, oddly enough, despite my renegade patent. Instead of controlling just about the ten members that were in the so-called Wiesenburg telephone caucus, I could almost count on forty or fifty votes, if I needed them, on my proposition. And in the '60 session, this got to be very important, because in the '60 session, Walter Sillers' supremacy was challenged for the first time by J. P. Coleman. J. P. Coleman was - I served with Hugh White one month, I served with J. P. Coleman, I served with Ross Barnett - and based upon what I've read of the Mississippi governors, J. P. Coleman was probably the greatest governor that our state has had since 1890. He was a man of vision, he was a man of resourcefulness he had great leadership characteristics, he was an able lawyer, he was a shrewd manipulator of people; and Walter Sillers almost met his match. Using the power of appointments - and I disagreed with the governor about this and he never could understand why - I didn't believe he should use the power of the governor to give a job to a legislator to insure the loyalty of the legislator to him. But he felt that this was necessary and he did it. He was interested in getting a constitutional convention. That was one of the great issues of his campaign. I was for a constitutional convention, but I wasn't for it on the governor's terms. Because the governor was going to have a constitutional convention with the same rotten reapportionment that we had under the constitution of 1890; and I couldn't see where we on the Coast would wind up with anything better apportioned under that constitutional convention

than we had, and for many reasons I wanted the constitutional convention, because we have an antiquated constitution that needs to be updated; and I voted for it in the final analysis, but I was one of the few members of the house who didn't speak on the issue. Since, as you notice, I'm not hesitant to speak, the reason for it was I disliked the format. On other issues, the vote was so close between the governor and the Speaker on their bills that my telephone caucus actually could carry the vote; and without really intending to do so, I became somewhat of a small power, and I emphasize the word "small," in the house. Bill Minor observed one time that there were only two people in the house that the house would stay quiet and listen to. One of them was Walter and the other was me, and the reason they would stay quiet was because they were always curious to know what I was coming up with. The unexpected was usually the order of the day.

Holmes:

Give me your version of the Bill Winter Speaker race.

Wiesenburg:

Bill Winter represented something which was anathema to Sillers and his faction. It represented a change, and it represented a progressive approach to Mississippi. All thinking Mississippians realize that this is the last feudal state in the union. This state is being run not by the legislature, not by the governor, it wasn't even being run by Walter Sillers. It was represented by the big corporations that Walter Sillers represented. And it still is run by big business, and it's still run by the industries, it is still run by the insurance companies, by the planters and the vested interests. The average man in Mississippi simply has the pleasure of paying the taxes. The taxes are always manipulated so that he bears the heaviest burden of the load. We have more sacred cows in our legislature than in any state in the union. And Mississippi has not emerged, yet, out into the sunlight. It is slowly doing so, but it's got a long way to go. Now, basically, that was the real thing behind the Sillers-

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Winter campaign. Sillers was the new Mississippi - I mean Sillers was the old Mississippi, Winter was the new Mississippi and, of course, the new Mississippi didn't have a ghost of a chance.

Holmes: Before you were elected to the legislature, had you been to the legislature on visits? Had you ever seen them in action?

Wiesenburg: No. Just like law school - which I did not have.

Holmes: The constitutional convention issue was an interesting one; and I've done a couple of interviews with Mrs. Walter Sillers, and she, of course, has one side of it to tell.

Wiesenburg: Well, as you notice, I'm almost in the position of being a neutral in the constitutional convention; because while I was in favor of the constitutional convention, I wasn't in favor of J. P. Coleman's constitutional convention. I wanted a constitutional convention where the people of the state would elect the delegates to that convention without regard to the apportionment in the constitution of 1890. I mentioned that for six years Mr. Sillers did not speak to me, but the reason he spoke to me was because the apportionment issue had been getting stronger and stronger, and I had introduced a resolution in the '62 session to appoint a committee to study the question of reapportionment. And then, for the first time, Sillers called me into his office and we sat down - and they had actually adopted my resolution, they changed it so I wouldn't get the credit by having my name on it, which I could care less, but that started the reapportionment breakthrough, which was finally really achieved by the federal courts.

Holmes: Did you have any opposition in your second race?

Wiesenburg: Oh, yes, I had two former legislators to run against me in my second race. One was the former kingpin of the county, J. Guy Krebs, the other was a character from Ocean Springs who was called "Cap Pistol" Fountain. Of

course, when he had been in the legislature, the only bill he introduced had been a bill to regulate the sale of cap pistols. Interesting campaign. I did not want to run in 1960. I was in the position of a man who had done everything that he really wanted to do that he set out to do in the first four years. Because the Jackson County Port Authority Act had been enacted, the State Port Act had been enacted, and I wanted to get down in the business of Jackson County in implementing the program and seeing that it was carried through, which I did. But unfortunately, when I had run against Mr. Byrd, I had made the statement from the stump that he was a sheriff who was seeking to go to the legislature until he could run for sheriff again. On the other hand, I was a man who could be re-elected and get seniority. And my wife, who is a very fine person and very conscientious, who had opposed me running in the first place because she thought I was going to get defeated - along with everyone else in Jackson County - simply told me that I had to run a second time, that I had to keep my promise. So I finally told Denise, my wife, I said, "Look, I'll cut the thing both ways. I'll keep my promise, I'll run for the legislature, but I won't campaign." She said, "That means you won't get elected." I said, "That's right, but I'll have kept my promise. I'll run." So I qualified, but I did not campaign, and it wasn't until the last week of the election that my two opponents woke up to the fact that I had attended no - well, I had attended a few rallies, but my speech at these rallies was very brief. It was simply this, "Ladies and gentlemen, there are three men running for this legislative post. Both of my opponents have been in the legislature. You know their record. I have finished four years. You know mine. Vote for the man that you think has the best record. Thank you." Nevertheless, strangely enough, I was re-elected. My wife had gone out to check the voting, because in those days the radio was not

broadcasting it, and she'd gone out to check the voting in the various precincts in the city, and she came back with a friend of hers with a very long face. The moment I looked at her, I said, "I'm not running very well, am I?" She said, "No," and she gave me the results, and I said, "Well, on the basis of what you told me I'm going to have a second primary with Guy Krebs and that means I'm going to be defeated, because an incumbent who doesn't win in the first primary usually has a great deal of trouble." And I said, "I'm going to bed." That was about eleven o'clock. At four o'clock in the morning, the phone rang and a friend of mine called me from Wade, Mississippi, which is one of our northern rural precincts. He said, "I just wanted to congratulate you on your re-election." Walter Lowrey, another dynamic individual. I told Walter, I said, "Walter, as usual, you're all wet." I said, "I'd have to carry the country precincts by ten to one to overcome the vote that Krebs got in Pascagoula and that Fountain got at Ocean Springs." He said, "Well, that's just what you did. You carried the country boxes by more than ten to one." I did, and it's very difficult to understand why the country people in the country in Jackson County would vote overwhelmingly for a New Yorker with a big city background, without any experience at farming or any realty of interest, except for the fact that I think the country people are a little more down to earth, a little more interested in the fact that the candidate was independent. I think they voted for my independence. But I was re-elected, and if I hadn't been re-elected, I never would have gone through the agony of the Meredith case.

Holmes: Well, I suppose that was the most difficult time.

Wiesenburg: Yes, and was rather strange. In June of 1962, I was at the height of my popularity as a legislator. Everywhere I went, all over Jackson County, people would come up to me and congratulate me on the fine job I was

doing, discuss their problems with me, and, of course, I was really interested in their problems. I went around and talked to the filling station operators about their problems with the tax on the tax; I talked with the teachers about their problems. As a matter of fact, I was in Ocean Springs, Mississippi, on September 13, 1962, and Merle Palmer, who was then the floater representative, was with me, and we were meeting with Mr. Taconi, superintendent of schools in Ocean Springs, discussing school problems with him and his staff, when Ross Barnett made his famous speech in which he called upon every Mississippian to defy the federal government. He called upon every elected official to go to jail rather than to submit to what he called the federal tyranny. And he also called a special session of the legislature to implement his speech, which was designed to keep Meredith out of the university of the state of Mississippi. Wilbur Dees, our present chancery clerk, was at that meeting, and I looked at Wilbur and I said, "Wilbur," I said, "I am going to have to do something that is going to be very unpopular in Jackson County and throughout the state of Mississippi. I'm going to have to vote against this insanity." And he said, "Well," he said, "Karl, you may know what you're doing," he said, "but I think you underestimate the emotion of the people on this issue." I said, "Be that as it may." I went on home. I realized how serious it was going to be, because the moment I heard the speech, it was a speech calling all of the bigots, all the zealots, all the worst instincts in man, to all assemble in Jackson for the purpose of what I would say would be the second secession of Mississippi from the union. I got my family together. I had two boys and two girls at that time, the girls were a little too young, but the boys were in high school; I told them - my wife and the boys - what my problem was and what I was going to do. They really didn't understand what was going to develop and I

had no illusions. Denise, as usual, said, "Well, Karl, do what you think is right." The boys said, "Daddy, whatever you want to do, we're with you." Well, I went to Jackson and they convened the special session. This is one time that J. P. Coleman did not respond as he usually does, with his usual dynamic leadership. He saw the overwhelming tide of public opinion, and he, reluctantly I think, joined in the passion of the moment. And, of course, the legislature - the Clarion-Ledger came out that the legislature unanimously adopted a resolution endorsing the great, through their great governor, Ross Barnett's dynamic speech of defiance to the federal government. Then they had to come out with a later edition to correct it, because two men voted no. One of them was Joe Wroten from Greenville, and the other was myself. Joe voted no because of his deep religious and earnest convictions from the purest and most unselfish of motives. I voted against it pragmatically, for the very simple reason that I felt that this was going to bring Mississippi into disgrace; and, as a matter of fact, I said during that session of the legislature that the actions of the governor and the actions of our leaders would inevitably lead to bloodshed and riot. And that's just what happened. When I voted no, the papers turned loose on me. The Clarion-Ledger came out in an editorial and they discussed "Red Light" Wiesenburg. Red Light, of course, as you know, has a very nasty connotation associated with brothels, which are called red light districts - which I have never been a frequenter of. But they used the term, because when you vote no in the legislature you press a red light. When you vote yes, you vote white. That was the beginning of a barrage of obscene phone calls, overt threats, actual threats, down to the point that one of my fellow legislators - I won't mention his name - who sat next to me - moved his seat because he didn't want to be sitting next to the pariah. As the special session

wore on, emotions got stronger and stronger; and, of course, Joe Wroten and I represented the opposition. Joe was very quiet about it, and I made no bones about the fact that I thought they were a bunch of jack asses and were acting as such. Of course, when you tell someone he's stupid, you don't endear yourself with him one iota. At home, my wife and my children were subject to all sorts of harassment, they burnt a cross in my front yard. The people would phone my wife to tell her they were going to lay in wait for me when I came back from Jackson, they were really serious about it. It's very difficult in this day and age to look back upon the real strong passions of the state of Mississippi. I'd thought I'd write a book about that period, and if I did I would call it "A State in Agony," because that's just what Mississippi was during that period. Preachers, doctors, judges, lawyers, even supreme court judges, they lost their cool, they lost their sense of decorum, and they became nothing but a palpitating mob....

(End of Side Two)

... lusting for blood. And in that atmosphere it was inevitable that the Oxford riot would take place, because they were building it up to a fever pitch. Ironically, the master of the scene, Ross Barnett, was probably more cool and less motivated, by anything other than political motives, than the people who were listening to him. Ross was sincere about what he was doing, no question of it, but he was maneuvering it to get the maximum amount of political mileage out of it; while on one hand he was driving the people of Mississippi up to fever pitch with his open defiance of the hated feds, he was talking almost daily on the telephone to Robert Kennedy, the attorney general. He was arranging all sorts of scenarios with Robert Kennedy on how Meredith would be admitted to the university over the last dying opposition of Ross Barnett. This was no secret. I heard his executive

assistant discussing the details of the phone calls. We knew it in the legislature, but the people didn't know it. The people were led to believe, as I said, in The Price of Defiance, that he had some plans, that he had some schemes, but he didn't. He knew that he could not resist. He knew that there was no legal method of stopping Meredith from being admitted to the university, but, as I said, he was going to get his last bit of political mileage out of it, and he almost drove this state so far down into the - well, he did drive it down into the mud; and even in this day and age Mississippi is the name of opprobrium in many nations. When they hear of Mississippi they think of the Oxford case, and they think of the students - men and women - stoning national guardsmen, their own Mississippians; shooting at federal marshals; posses - we had one organized from here; sheriffs and deputy sheriffs and law officers going to Oxford for the purpose of taking lives and violating their oath of office. This was a terrible time. And to emphasize it, right after I cast my no vote - I am an avid football fan and always went to the high school football games - Denise and I went to a Pascagoula high school football game right during the special session. Usually, when I walked into the stadium I would get calls from all over the stadium - "Hi, Karl," all the rest of this jolly business - when we walked into the stadium this day, we were not there, we were cut dead by everyone there, including people we had been friends with all our lives. When I left the stadium, one man, Dr. Minkler, came up, shook hands with me, said nothing, walked away. But it was a terrible time. And Joe and I, we would sit in our hotel room during that period when they were going through all that mockery of purportedly defying the feds, see, to keep Meredith out, just wondering what was happening to Mississippi. Those were gloomy days for both of us.

Holmes: I mentioned earlier that we had obtained some tapes from that special session. One of the recordings was made at the time when General Walker appeared.

Wiesenburg: Yes, I vividly recall that incident.

Holmes: And Mr. Sillers was about to introduce him when Sonny Merideth protested; and I remember that earlier in the interview you spoke very highly of Sonny Merideth and that incident came to mind.

Wiesenburg: Yes, as a matter of fact, when that happened, I was on my way walking out of the house, because I was determined I was not going to sit there and listen to General Walker, who at that time was being charged by his government with sedition and leading this uprising and fomenting the uprising; and Sonny - as I say, he's head and shoulders, he's one of the leaders of the legislature - got up and simply told Mr. Sillers that he wasn't going to stay there and listen to it, and he walked out. And I stopped and went back into the chamber and walked out with him, along with about a dozen or more legislators. Now, toward the end of the session -give J. P. credit - J. P. Coleman did everything that he could do to try to blunt the effects of what had been done. After the Oxford disaster, everyone realized that things had gone too far, but it didn't do too much good because there was a great out-pouring of defense of Mississippi. Dr. McCain at Southern Mississippi and a whole series of people wrote articles, John Satterfield - my friend, who at that time was president of the American Bar Association - they all joined together and wrote theses in defense of Mississippi's actions. Of course, when the people start wearing tags on their car "I'm Proud of Mississippi," of course, any student of psychology would tell you that simply meant that they were ashamed of Mississippi. A man that's proud of his state doesn't go around putting tags on his car and saying, "I'm proud of Mississippi." It was

a terrible time, and it was a time when passion ruled and where logic was not listened to. If I get too absorbed about this, it's simply because it was a very vivid period.

Holmes: I don't want to duplicate much that has been recorded, and you told me the other day on the phone that you had done one interview specifically on the Meredith incident.

Wiesenburg: It wasn't this type.

Holmes: Oh. And a good deal of writing has been done on it, although most of the writing was done by people who were not there at the time or involved with it. I was talking with Gerald Blessey last year, and he was an officer of the student government at the time of the Meredith incident, and we were discussing, of course, from a different viewpoint than we have here tonight, because he was younger and directly involved in the violence. But we got to talking about the proposition when did it become a crime in Mississippi for a black to be seen - or a white to be seen with a black? Because, at the time of the Meredith incident, I was just coming into awareness of such situations, or public awareness, or whatever you want to call it. And my memories from that time forward are that it really was criminal, that snide comments were the least reaction you got from your white friends.

Wiesenburg: Yes, the Meredith incident did more to hurt race relations in the state of Mississippi than anything I know of. My wife, as a child, used to play with blacks - all Southerners did. And the Southerners, mostly in the high income families and even the middle families, most of their children were reared by blacks. There was a very close relationship, but the Meredith case completely destroyed that. And since that time there's been nothing but distrust and animosity between the two races, and it has not been obliterated by any means, not even by the so-called joint meeting of the loyalists and the

regulars in the Democratic Party. One of the most interesting aspects, to me, during the session - the Meredith session - of the legislature, was the attitude of the press. You hear so much about the first amendment and the fearless advocates of the press who are going to tell the truth, no matter what the consequences. That wasn't true during the Meredith case. They were a bunch of sniveling cowards. They were so caught up with the passions of the moment that they actually were afraid. The Associated Press had a representative there - and I really wanted to take the floor, I disagreed with Joe Wroten, I wanted to take the floor and lay the cards on the table and tell the people of Mississippi what the truth was. Joe said to me, he said, "Karl, if you do, there's not a newspaper man - and I'll include Bill Minor in that - that will print it, because they would fear for the safety of their family's and their own lives. Well, this Associated Press representative came over one day and I said, "Look," I said, "let me ask you something." And I told him exactly why I had voted against all of this insanity, not because I was a segregationist as such, because that's a meaningless phrase as far as I'm concerned, an integrationist - that's a meaningless phrase as far as I'm concerned - I told him what they were doing is that they were driving Mississippi down the road which would lead to forced integration in the school, forced integration in every aspect of our cultural life and that forced integration would divide our races rather than unite them. And he said, "I can't print that, Karl." I said, "Why can't you print it?" He said, "I've got a wife and family." So the noble fourth estate at times, when the times really get tough, they're human after all, and they react like human beings.

Holmes:

After the Meredith incident, a new election came up. Did you decide not to run because you thought your eight years were up?

Wiesenburg: No, there was a great deal of speculation in Jackson County in 1964 as to whether or not I could have been elected; and I probably could have, strange as it may sound, notwithstanding the Meredith case. By '64, that was a year and a half afterwards, and passions were starting to die down. A lot of people were going to say, "You know, what Wiesenburg has predicted is taking place," which was the accelerated pace of school integration in the state of Mississippi by the federal government. Another thing is there's always the tendency - people forget very quickly. Memories are very short. However, if you recall, I didn't want to run in 1960, and I had already announced, because the moment I was elected everywhere I went - this was before the Meredith case - I said I will not be a candidate for re-election. I had made a promise that I would run, and this time I didn't want to get caught again. I had no intention of running for re-election. I had a very successful practice, legal practice; and when the legislature was in session, since I had a one-man operation, my income for the year that we had the regular session - then it was every two years would drop so sharply that I would have to explain to internal revenue why my income was on one level one year and so much of a lower level next year. So I did not run for re-election, without any regrets. One trouble with a legislative life is that if a legislator stays up there very long, he gets down to the point that he thinks he's akin to the Almighty. There are more little men in that legislature with big ideas about how important they are than there are honest, sincere legislators who are trying to do their job as best they can; and the system really does this to them. They are courted by the utility interests, and by what I've named the power structure before, as if they were mistresses of Louis XIV. It's little things that decide how a legislator votes. They are not bribed. The vast majority, in fact, I'd say unanimously, they would reject

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with horror the idea that they would take a bribe. A case of whiskey, a woman or a dinner or a trip - hunting trip - or something of this type, oh, yes, that's perfectly honorable and perfectly natural. The caliber of people we've sent to our legislature has improved considerably since 1964, but it's got a long way to go.

Holmes: Do you have any comments about the role of the "third house" of the legislature, the Edwards House?

Wiesenburg: Well, in those days it was the legislature, because all of the decisions were made, and that's where the Sillers caucus held sway; and there was a regular barony with Mr. Sillers at the head of his empire. Really, he was treated - you would think you were in Austria in the days of the Hapsburgs rather than in an American system, because he ran as the emperor triumphant. I, occasionally, would invade the enemy territory at the Edwards House. I stayed at the Robert E. Lee, and I would invade the territory down there just to needle them. I enjoy needling people, and they had very thin skin, so it didn't take much.

Holmes: You were in the company, then, of Hilton Waits at the Robert E. Lee, weren't you?

Wiesenburg: Yes, Hilton was one of the chief members of the Sillers faction. Hilton was a man, actually, of very great ability. Had he lived, probably, he would have been Speaker of the House. Legislative-wise, he was a very astute, a very clever, a very hard-working legislator.

Holmes: I think you have illustrated to me tonight that one of the best approaches to the legislature is tongue-in-cheek, that you might get more done than if you take yourself too seriously as a representative.

Wiesenburg: Yes, and that's the worst part about this legislative set-up. They get obsessed with the idea of their own importance. My wife advocates that no

public officer ought to be elected more than eight years and ought to be forced to go into retirement for as long as they serve - for another eight years - before they can run for public office again. I think our American system would be a lot better off if this was done, because a legislator who stays up there and is re-elected for term after term becomes a psychopathic case, he loses all touch with reality, he gets a sense of power out of something in which he really exercises no power at all; it's an illusion, a myth. But he feeds upon it himself, and he feeds his ego on it until he really believes it. Then that man becomes really a dangerous man, because he believes that he's above the people, that he knows what is best for them. And that is a dangerous approach to take.

Holmes: Well, Mississippi is notorious for returning the incumbent, particularly on the national scene, except when the Mississippi legislature redistricts; and I believe that at the time you were in the legislature there were one or two redistricting battles, weren't there?

Wiesenburg: Yes, there were one or two redistricting battles, but, oddly enough, I was the last sole legislator from Jackson County. I mockingly told my successors that it took five men to take my place, because reapportionment came in 1964. Now we have five and we share another with George County, so there are six legislators. The situation has changed quite a bit. Actually, I think when I was alone I had, probably, more power than all of the six of them together, because I didn't have to get into a caucus with myself, and I didn't have to disagree with myself. I made up my mind one way or the other, and that's how I voted. I always voted yes or no. I probably cast more no votes than any member of the legislature.

Holmes: At a time when most everybody voted the way everybody else did. Well, I certainly appreciate the time that you have given me. Now, there's plenty of tape left if there are other pertinent points that you want to make.

Wiesenburg: Yes. Well, for the benefit of history, since this is a historical narrative, let me say that what I have said here represents the view of one man, and my view is not necessarily an objective view, for the very simple reason that I was caught up in the passions of the Meredith case; and, also, because I, perhaps, have not been as sympathetic to some of the people I've served with as I should be. All of us have our limitations, and I think I was somewhat impatient with the limitations of others and inclined to overlook my own limitations. So if this sounds like a very egotistical, very abrasive discussion of Mississippi and its problems, there's another side to that coin. When you get underneath the people of Mississippi, they are warm, they are hospitable, they are as intelligent as any other state in the union, but they have been used, they have been manipulated, and they are still being used and manipulated by people in this state who have no more concern for the average man - or have less concern for the average man in Mississippi than they have for their hound dog. And with that I'll end it.

(End of Side Three)

(Transcribed by Mary H. Mingee,)

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