

An Interview with

LEVYE CHAPPLE, SR.

May 1, 1977

Interviewed by

Daisy Greene

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and the
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Scope Note: The Washington County Library System, with assistance from the Mississippi Department of Archives and History, conducted oral history interviews with local citizens. The project interviews took place between 1976 and 1978. The interviewees included long-term residents of the Greenville-Washington County area in their late 50's and older.

GREENE: May 1, 1977. This is an interview with Mr. Levye Chapple, Sr., for the Mississippi Archives Department and the Washington County Library System. The interview is at Mr. Chapple's home at 240 Cornell Street. The interviewer is Daisy Greene.

Mr. Chapple, give me the place and date of your birth.

CHAPPLE: I was born in Greenville, Mississippi on July 1, 1908.

GREENE: And your mother's maiden name and your father's name.

CHAPPLE: Harriet Pierce, and my father was John Columbus Chapple.

GREENE: How was it that your father began work in the printing business?

CHAPPLE: It's a long story ma'am. First of all, Greenville was headquarters for several state-wide fraternal organizations. There were the Masons, the Pythians, and the Knights and Ladies of Honor. The leadership they had in those days, the black leadership in Mississippi, finally went out of existence. My father had a young fraternal organization which he founded himself, and he started the paper. He called it the "LIGHTHOUSE". This was created in order that the organizations would have a mouthpiece. It was started on September 1, 1896, and the paper was named "THE DELTA LIGHTHOUSE". I might point out that they bought a lot of equipment from the present Delta Democrat Times, and some of their mechanics and pressmen and type-setters taught all of the black persons that my father employed to run the printing shop. Prior to that time, there were no blacks in the state of Mississippi who could run the business.

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GREENE: Do you still have some of that material?

CHAPPLE: Yes, we have it, some of it. Actually, we have two or three pieces in our office now that my father brought from the old Bank of Washington back in 1896. This was equipment they had, and they were putting in new equipment. We still have several pieces of that equipment.

GREENE: I imagine that is a collector's item now?

CHAPPLE: It is.

GREENE: Where is the Bank of Washington building?

CHAPPLE: The building now is the office of Attorney Douglas Wynn. It is on Poplar Street near the First National Bank building.

GREENE: About how long was your father in the business?

CHAPPLE: He established it in 1896, and he passed in 1919.

That is about twenty-three years.

GREENE: Who operated it after his death?

CHAPPLE: After the death of my father, my oldest brother Leon, operated the business, together with Fred E. Brown, who learned the trade while working for my father. They operated it two, three or four years, and then my oldest brother who wasn't interested in newspapers. Then I began. At that time I was about fifteen years of age, and I began publication of my own little paper. I called it "THE OWL". It was mostly a paper for youngsters. Ultimately, I went into a more serious paper as I grew older.

GREENE: You didn't bring a copy of "THE OWL"?

CHAPPLE: I don't have a copy. It was really "THE GREENVILLE GAZETTE", but most people called it "THE OWL." It was mostly a gossip paper for youngsters.

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GREENE: I am looking at one of the papers you brought, "THE DELTA LIGHTHOUSE", published in 1896, and I notice there are no ads, Mr. Chapple. How do you account for that?

CHAPPLE: Well, as I pointed out, this was a strong fraternal area. As a matter of fact, it was the headquarters for fraternal organizations in Mississippi. Bishop Lampton was head of the Masons and H. B. Brown was head of the Pythians. We had worlds of money, money in the thousands of dollars. The Masons were an organization itself. It could sponsor its own paper.

GREENE: So, for that reason, I see why there was so much emphasis on Lodges and Burial Unions in this paper of 1896. Now, I am looking at the paper of December 13, 1919. Will you tell me about that paper?

CHAPPLE: That was a larger paper, with more ads. But what happened was the associates were in need of money, so the Pastor of the Mount Horeb Church was a college man, and he came in with new ideas, and that was possibly the reason for the paper becoming better, larger, and more ads, and that possibly accounts for the paper.

GREENE: Will you read some of those prices in Ross's Meat Market ad?

CHAPPLE: Well, in that ad of the Ross Meat Market, liver was fifteen cents a pound and butter was seventy-five cents a pound.

GREENE: I will hand you the paper so that you may read the list of professionals.

CHAPPLE: Oh, yes. It says that James Miller was a Medical Doctor, and Dr. Miller is the father of Daisy Greene, and, incidentally, he delivered me when I was born. Another doctor is I. W. Brown. Dr. Brown practiced in Greenville for some time and then he moved to St. Louis. Subsequently, he

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moved back to Mississippi, to Jackson, where he was killed. The killer has never been apprehended. And there was Dr. Hendricks. He came to Greenville from Port Gibson. He practiced here for a number of years and finally moved to Gary, Indiana, where he passed.

Another professional at that time was Dr. Earl Brown, who was a dentist. Dr. Brown was the son of Dr. E. P. Brown, the first physician to come to Greenville, and was one of the men who inspired black people to home-ownership by purchasing land in what is now called Brown's Addition. At that time, blacks could buy a lot for as low as ten dollars. Dr. Brown had three children: Dr. Earl, whom I mentioned was a dentist, and another who was a physician, Dr. Emerson Brown; and his daughter was a physician Dr. Daisy Brown. She was the first woman, black or white, in the South, to become a medical doctor. Also, at that time, a dentist, Dr. John C. Overton, who practiced dentistry here for a lifetime. He just passed several years ago.

Prominent at that time was John Webster, the barber; and John Harris who was in the grocery business. Incidentally, there was an ad in that paper from Sumner-Wells & Company, Funeral Directors and Embalmers. This was a white concern. They didn't solicit black business. They just went along, more or less, to help the black newspaper advertising department. A few Jews helped the paper at that time. Some were Solomon, and the Fair Store, which were operating then and are operating today. Another store was Levi's. Levi's has long since gone out of business. Still another ad was Mississippi Beneficial Life Insurance Company, founded in Indianola, Mississippi, by Dr. J. C. Walker. The Mississippi Beneficial Life now is the Universal Life Insurance Company, with headquarters in Memphis, Tennessee.

Another ad is from Sol Brill, one of the Jews who was quite liberal with advertisements. He had a clothing store here. Another ad from the Delta

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Undertaking Company, founded by a man named George Bradford. He was a builder and contractor. He was a black man who was contractor and builder of Weinberg store. Mr. Bradford was the first black person in Greenville to own an automobile, and, ironically, he was the first person to get killed in an automobile. He was killed a few months after he bought the automobile on what is now the Old Leland Road.

GREENE: Now, Mr. Chapple, in this edition of "DELTA LIGHTHOUSE" December 6, 1919, there are a few points I would like you to mention.

CHAPPLE: Well, those are three ads from the Star Pressing Clubs operated by the Howard family. They were prominent people here. It was a large family, and they lived on the corner of Nelson and Hinds. And there is an ad from Fowler, the painter. All of the Fowlers are gone now, but they were some of the prominent people here in their day and time.

GREENE: What about our tinner?

CHAPPLE: Oh, George Rowe - G. C. Rowe was the one and only tinner Greenville had as such. He was very civic-minded. I might point out that he was one of the founders of the early YMCA when the blacks had it, and, of course, Dr. J. H. Miller was the originator of the idea, and Mr. Rowe was one of the persons who went along with him in the formation of Nelson Street "Y".

GREENE: Don't they have any black tanners now?

CHAPPLE: Not as such. The little tin work now, perhaps, is done by plumbing companies. Tin isn't used at all now. But tanners handled it exclusively when tin was used in a building, store, or what not.

GREENE: I see there is a new title for the 1948 edition of "THE GREENVILLE LEADER." How did that come about?

CHAPPLE: Well, "THE GREENVILLE LEADER" was actually started in 1930. "THE DELTA LIGHTHOUSE" went out of existence during the 1927 Flood, at which time I moved to Memphis and stayed for three years and returned in 1930 to begin to publish and edit "THE GREENVILLE LEADER."

GREENE: I see - "THE GREENVILLE LEADER" was a Chapple operation?

CHAPPLE: That's right, the same family operation, just under a different name.

GREENE: You said that you learned quite a bit while you were working at "THE TRIANGLE." Where was that?

CHAPPLE: In Memphis, the three years I was there I worked at "THE TRIANGLE," which then was one of the most outstanding weekly papers in the South. I learned quite a bit as I had no formal training. "The TRIANGLE" had quite a number on the staff from some of the leading schools of journalism in the country, so I had the opportunity to get a lot of training under them.

GREENE: I notice in the issue of January 26, 1948, there is a detailed story about Dr. Delaine's funeral. Do you know something about him?

CHAPPLE: Dr. Delaine was an unusual man. He was an unusual leader. He came to Greenville at a time when there was needed a certain type of leadership. I might point out that in Greenville for many years leadership came from the professionals - the doctors, dentists and whatnot. But there was a lag or lapse in there for a number of years, and Dr. Delaine came along and provided the type of leadership in politics and civil rights that the blacks in the city needed then. As I said, a void had come about for over a period of years.

GREENE: For our future readers: I haven't been able to get much material on Dr. Delaine. If you are interested, read the January 28, 1948 edition of The Greenville Ledger. There is quite a bit of detailed information about his life in this city.

Now, Mr. Chapple, in this 1942 edition I see this picture of Jimmie Hayes. Who is she?

CHAPPLE: She is wife of the late T. L. Weston. She taught at Lucy Webb School on Sound Hinds. She is the present Mrs. Weston, widow of the late T. L. Weston, who taught in our school system for many, many years.

GREENE: I have been trying to find some information on C. H. Garrett, but few know him. Yesterday I found it in the issue of the 11th edition of The Greenville Leader, 1936.

CHAPPLE: It is a beautiful story of Mr. Garrett.

GREENE: Who is Mr. Garrett?

CHAPPLE: He is one of our pioneer citizens, a business man, operated a grocery store here for many years. He was quite active in the fraternal organizations, particularly the Masonic organization, and one of the founders of Live Oak Cemetery Association which established the hospital here many years ago.

GREENE: I notice one edition covers "75 YEARS OF PROGRESS IN GREENVILLE, MISSISSIPPI." How did you happen to have that celebration?

CHAPPLE: Well, actually the celebration came about accidentally. There was a young man who came in. He was a promoter. A young fellow came to work on the newspaper for me, and he said he would rather promote something than sell advertising. Of course, I knew we had never had any celebration about progress since we were free, so I felt that it would be a good thing to celebrate - "76 Years of Progress" in Washington County. The record

showed then - it shows now - that Negroes have always progressed in quite a number of areas in Washington County, over and above the rest of the Negroes in other counties.

GREENE: Will you mention a few of the articles in that publication celebrating "⁷⁵76 Years of Progress?"

CHAPPLE: Possibly the highlight of the seventy-five years of progress was the appearance of George Washington Carver of Tuskegee. There were many organizations throughout the United States that had tried to get Dr. Carver who was aging then, to come to their community. Dr. Delaine and a group of us went to Tuskegee one Sunday and invited him to come here. That's possibly the biggest thing that ever happened, up to this point, in our city. We were also able to bring the great orchestra leader, Duke Ellington, here at that particular time. We had 100 percent cooperation from the entire county, both black and white. One of the stellar performances I may point out, was the choir, made up of 250 people from various churches throughout the city. They were ably conducted by Mrs. C. B. K. Butler, of St. Matthews Church, and Miss Leyser Crawford of Mount Horeb Church.

GREENE: There is also an article in which Mr. E. H. Garrett proudly mentioned that we had one hundred colored registered voters. How does that compare with what we have now?

CHAPPLE: That is quite a difference, having one hundred then, but people - maybe six hundred and eighty-three thousand, or maybe nine or ten in the county. I would like to point out though, that it was in 1938 when the number value depreciates because of the payment of a two dollar poll tax. Most of the elections then were conducted by the Democratic Party. That more or less, accounts for the low number at that particular time. But now since payment of the poll tax - the one way blacks could participate in all

parties - Democrat, Republican, or what, voting administration became easy.

GREENE: Now, would you comment on "THE GREENVILLE LEADER" of 1939?

CHAPPLE: That particular edition mentions the opening of Brown's Pastry Shop. We didn't have blacks at that time who employed more than one or two persons. They gave employment right away to quite a number of people. It also speaks of the funeral of Mr. Deplessy Craig, the founder of the Sons and Daughters and the King's Daughters Hospital. The late Dr. Hugh Gamble delivered the oration at Mr. Craig's funeral. It also mentioned a beauty school, which was owned and operated at that time by Bernadine Garrett, who now lives in Indiana.

GREENE: You have a priceless collection, Mr. Chapple. I trust that you will let the Archives have copies of your papers.

CHAPPLE: Yes, I want particularly for them to have copies in Greenville...not the originals. There are so few people who have any relative material on blacks in the history of Washington County. Many have made a terrific contribution to our city and county, but there is so little in print.

GREENE: Mr. Chapple, have you ever been engaged in any work other than printing and publishing?

CHAPPLE: Along with printing and publishing I spent ten or twelve years in the sales field as sales manager for the Young Manufacturing Company of Meridian, Mississippi and Chicago, Illinois. It manufactured products for beauty parlors in the South. I was able to organize an operation I called the Mississippi Beauticians Association in 1941. I have from that time been public relations counselor within that organization.

GREENE: Are you working with them now?

CHAPPLE: Emeritus, but I'm still working.

GREENE: Tell me about the Chicago-Greenville Club that had a big affair here.

CHAPPLE: Well, that affair here a year or two ago, was a national homecoming. There are a lot of people living throughout the United States who formerly lived in Greenville and retired. They are the kind who own their own homes and have Social Security coming in, who never came back, but wanted to come back home. So we decided to have that national homecoming several years ago. We were pleased to have several thousand people come back. Now, one thing that helped us was that in a number of major cities they have Greenville, Mississippi Clubs which encouraged people to attend homecoming. The second homecoming will be in Greenville, Mississippi on July 1st and 2nd, 1978.

GREENE: You were instrumental in preparing a booklet on black history in Greenville. Do you know whether the booklet has been helpful?

CHAPPLE: Definitely. We have calls for it all the time, particularly from the schools that are interested in history. We put out three or four thousand copies of that booklet, and we have calls now. The book department last year asked to up-date it, because they are beginning to get some help from the history department of the schools. We hope to update the history, and will have it for distribution some time next year.

GREENE: Who is Reverend Calvin? Is he connected with the Presbyterian Church?

CHAPPLE: No, he is Assistant Pastor at Mount Horeb Baptist Church.

GREENE: You are also connected with the Regional Council of Negro Leaders, aren't you?

CHAPPLE: Well, now that organization has folded up. I might point out that the Council on Negro Leadership was founded by Dr. Howard, to take the place of the NAACP. It was organized shortly after the Supreme Court's decision. Since the NAACP was Persona Non Grata at that time, we had to form another organization to carry on the same work that NAACP carried on, under a different name. And that's how it came into being.

GREENE: Would you define "Persona Non Grata" in this case?

CHAPPLE: Let me get it right now. The common term - obnoxious to those people who were not for integration. I'll just put it that way. The NAACP was an organization responsible for the decision of the U.S. Supreme Court on the segregation issue, and certainly the organization to take the lead in that didn't take too well, particularly in the South.

GREENE: You are associated with the Washington County Democratic Club, aren't you?

CHAPPLE: Yes, but the Washington County Democratic Club is not as active as it was years ago. As a matter of fact, they established the WCDC here to support the Democratic Ticket. At that particular time, blacks were not welcome in the Democratic Party in Washington County, Greenville, or the State. Nevertheless, there were a lot of us who wanted the support of the Democratic ticket for the type presidents we had - Roosevelt and Truman. We organized the Washington County Democratic Club that supported the Democratic candidates. Now that Negroes are interested in all phases of the Democratic Party, from local to national, it isn't necessary to have such types of organizations as the Washington County Democratic Club. As a result there could be finances in hand which they will some day pass over to some worthy cause.

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I hope, Mrs. Greene, that I have given you some light on the history of Greenville and Washington County, and I will say that everywhere I go in Washington County blacks have made staggering contributions toward the progress of this County. I hope that such information as I have been able to save and pass on will inspire others to do more research - that some day we will have incorporated into history all the contributions which black people have made to the progress of Washington County.

GREENE: Thank you, Mr. Chapple.

(End of Interview)

(Transcribed by Alice C. Nagel)

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