Title: An interview with Dixon L. Pyles, December 1, 1984/
interviewed by John Dittmer
DITTMER: Let me just see. This is John Dittmer at the Office of Attorney Dixon Pyles. This is December 1, 1984 in Jackson, Mississippi. 
...This toward you because my voice always picks up better for some reason, and I don't want to hear myself. Well, I wanted to talk to you for a couple of reasons. One, because Ed and other people that I run into, and things like some over-cross in my research have all come up with your excellent resource person for that particular period. So, what I would like to do is to talk you some about your own involvement in things, but also about your own observation about race and politics during this period of the fifties and the sixties. With that introduction, I wonder if you could just tell me a little bit about your background in the state, and then I will get more specific.

PYLES: All right. Well, I was January the first, 1913, in Little Rock, Arkansas, and at a very early age, I came to Mississippi and brought my parents with me. 

DITTMER: Oh, really?
and I graduated from Central High School in Jackson here in 1930. At that time we do what was called, it was a depression on. My father was a claim adjuster for the Home Insurance Company, and, if you will remember, Phail McLeod and his insurance empire, they had collapsed. So, my family went back to Little Rock, where the employment opportunities for him were much better than, or he thought they were, than in Mississippi. I was a freshman in Millsaps, at that time, and so I remained, and have remained here every since.

I graduated from Millsaps in 1933 with an undergraduate degree in just History...

Which is, I don't know how valid it is since that time. I immediately took my undergraduate degree and went to Chicago to the World's Fair and became a rickshaw puller, and I'm not sure, but I believe that I probably had more spendable income. And then I came back to Mississippi, and studied law in the Jackson School of Law, and worked on the Federal Writer's Project for the Clarion Ledger.
and I was the, probably, for as I can
tell, the first radio news broadcaster in
1933 and that Mississippi had.

DITTMER: Oh, were you on WJDX?

PYLES: I was. JDX; if you will recall, WJDX didn't

go on the air until December of 1929, and so,

we didn't have very many radio stations at

the time. And I then worked for the Federal

Housing Administration in 1939, I was

admitted to practice law and open my office

in 1940, and then in 1942, I went away to

military service. I discovered that at

Millsaps I had been able to pass calculus and

analytical geometry; so, the army decided to

which

send me off to an anti-aircraft school and

had a three phase equation which they

thought I could work it. When the war was

over, I had a regular commission, and I am

now a retired Lieutenant Colonel.
But I have been practicing law, almost, continuously, except the thirty-five years in the service, since that time. Now, you know that...

DITTMER: Oh well...

DITTMER: Uneventful career of Dixon Pyles.

Well, I don't think it's very much uneventful, as I hope to indicate shortly. One of the things, and I'll be just sort of throwing out my own ideas about the period, and I would, you know, appreciate you when I say this. If anything you want to say to add or to contradict, because I'm here to learn. But, one of things that I have found in talking to people, particularly Blacks, in trying to come up with some sort of periodization, you know, when does the Civil Rights Movement start? Well, you can pick, practically, anytime. I think that World War II had, obviously, had an impact. If you looked, I think three of the more important Black leaders in the 50's in Mississippi - Aaron Henry, and Medger Evers, and Moore, all of them were native sons who went
off to war and came back saying that they weren't going to put up with things the way they were. Moore and others had pointed out to a couple of things in the mid 50's that had sort of a catalytic effect. And they mentioned Brown decision, of course, and it's aftermath, and also the Emmett Till lynching, as having a big affect in the Black community, as well as the white. And so, I'm sort of following that up, but I'm also interested in a couple of years before the Willie Magee case, and I was wondering if you could just talk a little bit about how you got involved in that, and I'm sure there's a good deal of interest surrounding that and I want to bring that in as well.

Yes. I believe, frankly, the Civil Rights Movement in the South began after the Civil War. The economics of the situation was that
the South, being an agricultural society, was in poverty. The Whites had the land, but they did not have the labor. And no one had the finances to carry on agriculture. So, in a desperate move, immediately following the Civil War, the Whites and the Blacks—the former slaves here in Mississippi—cooperated for their own economic survival in this thing. The Whites provided the land and what capital they had, and the Blacks provided the labor. They were eking out a very, very precarious existence economically under that situation, but they were making progress, and had they been allowed to continue in that economic effort together, the history of the South, I think, would have been entirely differently, then what it has been. But the Hayes-Tilden's presidential campaign intervened in that period immediately following the tragedy of the Grant administration. And the republican who had a grand in line and plan, as I think you will discover if you investigate carefully the history, and it was a form of subsidies for railroads and industries and things of that sort. Not saying that that was too bad, at that time, it may have helped the nation a
great deal. But the people were... we might say, at the Grand
administration excesses and
violation of the
moral, as well as the statutory laws
stealing... and so they actually were
determined to elect a
Democrat into the
Electoral
and did! And the electoral college votes in
South Carolina; I come on in.

SMITH
VOICE: Would you like some coffee?

PYLES: I have some and...

SMITH
VOICE: Would you like some?

DITTMER: No, thank you.

PYLES: And, come on in, I'm expounding with
absolutely no factual basis...

SMITH
VOICE: Then I know you're in heaven.

PYLES: This is Mrs. Smith, and...

DITTMER: Hi.

PYLES: ...this is Dr. Dittmer.
Very nice to meet you.

So with the electoral college votes in South Carolina, and Florida, Louisiana, and one in Oregon. Now, you may have to correct my, 

I think you've got it.

with my political reconnaissance which would have given Tilden the presidency at that time. The Republicans being firmly in control of the executive and the supreme court managed to get a commission appointed to determine just who was entitled to the electoral college votes. So, in the mean time, they decided to see if they could not negotiate some sort of a settlement with the South by giving certain concessions. So, they met in New Orleans, down here, to work out that settlement of the presidency to see if they could not agree to permit the counting of those votes from Hayes rather than Tilden.
Mississippi was represented by economic royalist, and I think all the other Southern states were that compromise 1877 in New Orleans. Mississippi was represented by L.Q.C. Lamar, J.Z. George, and - I can't remember the third one, I'll think of it, shortly, and let you know. The results of the agreement was that the financial institutions in the North would provide capital for the carrying on of the economic agricultural empire that we had down here, cause we had very little in the way of industry, and, as a matter of fact, don't think we wanted much to carry it on as we were. And they would also temper the first civil rights acts that were passed during the Civil War and subsequent to the Civil War what is now 42 USC 1983. It stated out in 1861, I think, as a spy act to keep spies from infiltrating too much in the North. But, in any event, those acts were passed by a mad man from Lancaster, Pennsylvania, as you may know. And so, they agreed, the Republicans agreed, that if they would go along with this proposal to let them count all these Electoral college votes for Hayes, that they would require that every act would have to be state
initiated rather than the individuals, and they would continue to let the state courts try the individual cases, which meant in effect, that civil rights would not exist in the private sector, but only in the public sector. They agreed to that, and they lived up to it, I think. The Republicans pretty much lived up to it. As a result, 42 USC 1983 was not utilized until 1936, when the CIO came into existence, and they were attempting to organize the industrial workers. My I digress.

DITTMER:

Oh, certainly.

PYLES:

The three people who represented Mississippi at that compromise of 1877, L.Q.C. Lamar, E.C. Waller, and James L. George. So, it worked very well. As a result of that compromise, Hayes was elected. Hayes always had a soft spot in his heart, for the South. When that came about, it was no longer economically necessary for the white southern farmer to continue to cooperate with the black citizen, who had been recently enfranchise. So, as a consequence, the compromise of 1877 completely changed the