

Interview with **Jan Robertson**

May 8, 1986

Production Team: A

Camera Rolls: 227-230

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Note: These transcripts contain material that did not appear in the final program. Only text appearing in ***bold italics*** was used in the final version of *Eyes on the Prize*.

00:00:02:00

[camera roll 227]

[sound roll 1161]

[slate]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: MARK PLEASE.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: MARKER.

INTERVIEWER: JUST HAVING A CONVERSATION.

Jan Robertson: Hi. OK. All right.

INTERVIEWER: I'D LIKE TO START BY ASKING YOU ABOUT WHAT YOU CALL THE SOUTHERN WAY OF LIFE. CAN YOU DESCRIBE FOR US BRIEFLY WHAT OLE MISS WAS LIKE THEN?

Robertson: Well, when I was at Ole Miss one of the most important things was sports. There was not a great deal of interest in world affairs, national affairs. Primarily as, as involved race and integration were the topics if they were discussed at all. More was discussed about our winning football team. It was a, it was a place where mainly women took a background role. Most of the women who were students there were not—did not consider themselves necessarily preparing for a career but for a—well, well a career choice as a wife and mother more than going out into the workplace. The teaching profession was about one of the few

things that was really open to women in the South in that—at that particular time. There was not the questioning of authority and authority figures that students do so much now, at that time. You—most of the students pretty much accepted what the Governor had to say or the senators or, you know, legislators and there was, there was very little questioning of the way things were. It was an all-white world. Whatever contact students had with blacks were mainly in the context of, perhaps, a cook or a babysitter or a maid in the household. There was very little opportunity. Now, I grew up out in the country on a farm and so my playmates, by and large, were black and, and my brother and, and sister. But that was—there was just not an opportunity for blacks and whites to get to know each other. And so, you tended to accept stereotypes as the fact about what people were like and what they thought.

00:02:51:00

INTERVIEWER: WAS IT A HAPPY PLACE?

Robertson: I think Ole Miss was a very—it was, it was a very lively place. Everybody spoke, everybody just about knew everybody else. It was, it was a very social place. A lot of life evolved around fraternities and sororities and the parties there. At—my senior year, which was the year—

00:03:23:00

[cut]

[wild audio]

Robertson: —of Meredith's admission, was an atypical year from the very beginning.

INTERVIEWER: I'M GONNA STOP YOU THERE AND DO A CAMERA CHANGE HERE.

Robertson: I'm sorry, I babbled on. I'm—

00:03:36:00

[cut]

[slate]

[change to camera roll 228]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: ROLL TWO-TWO-EIGHT. MARKER.

INTERVIEWER: LET HIM GET SETTLED FOR A MOMENT THERE.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: ALL RIGHT.

INTERVIEWER: ALL RIGHT.

Robertson: All right. Segregation and integration were not an everyday topic of conversation on the campus. Of course, once application for Meredith was filed in what—in the weeks leading up to his arrival on the campus, it did become quite a topic of conversation. But, I think, a lot of students frankly did not consider whether they would be involved in integration. There were some who felt very strongly and some of those students were involved in, in the rioting. I think probably the, the large majority of the students were not involved. There was a curiosity factor. But, again, it was not the hot topic of conversation. You talked—you heard much more talk about how the football team was doing than about that issue.

00:04:59:00

INTERVIEWER: WELL, AS THE MEREDITH CASE WENT THROUGH THE COURTS YOU STARTED TO SAY THIS, OF COURSE THERE BECAME MORE—A LOT MORE INTEREST, A LOT MORE INVOLVEMENT. CAN YOU REMEMBER ANY STORIES THAT TELL—GIVE US A FLAVOR FOR HOW, HOW FEELING WAS GOING. PARTICULARLY WE'RE GETTING TO SEPTEMBER. I MEAN OPENING TERM—OR MAYBE THE END—OH AND THAT SUMMER MAYBE.

Robertson: Well, of course, in the summer I, I was not there on the campus. When we arrived on campus—[pause] can I stop?

INTERVIEWER: STOP FOR A MOMENT, PLEASE?

Robertson: Yeah, let me stop for a minute [laughs].

[cut]

00:05:41:00

[slate]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: MARKER.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: MARKER.

Robertson: All right. OK. The summer before the year that Meredith entered, in my Sunday school class, the college-age Sunday school class that my mother taught, she asked the students there, many of whom went to Ole Miss, what would you do if a black were admitted to the University? And most people kind of said, well, you know, I'm, I'm not quite sure. Some said they wouldn't mind. Some that they hadn't thought about it and then we got to one boy who was in my class in high school and he said, without batting an eyelash, I'd wait until he went to sleep and I'd slip into his room and I'd slit his throat. And everybody—all of a

sudden the room was just appalled. And, you know, said, you, you really wouldn't do that would you? And he said, yes. And he, he said it with, you know, with great feeling, but it was almost a matter of fact, you know, of, of course that's what he would do and he was there. He was a student at Ole Miss and I thought and wondered [laughs] what he would do when Meredith did come on the campus, but.

00:07:08:00

INTERVIEWER: BUT—GOOD, GOOD. WE'LL LEAVE THAT THERE. NOW, NOW JUST BEFORE, WELL—WE MIGHT GET THAT FAR. THERE'S AN INFLUX OF OUTSIDERS THAT COME INTO OXFORD IN THE TWO, THREE WEEKS AT THE BEGINNING OF SEPTEMBER. LOT OF PEOPLE AROUND. DID YOU SEE THAT? COULD, COULD YOU DESCRIBE THAT FOR US?

Robertson: There were people who came on the campus in the weeks preceding the riots. Some that would just come when—

INTERVIEWER: I'M SORRY. I'M GONNA ASK YOU NOT TO SAY “PRECEDING THE RIOTS” BECAUSE, WELL, WE HAVEN'T GOTTEN TO THEM YET.

Robertson: OK. All right. There really weren't that many people who were coming on the campus—the day of the riot is when people—the day before and the day of the riot but—

INTERVIEWER: BUT WE'VE SEEN REPORTS OF RADIO REPORTS AND PEOPLE DRIVING THROUGH, AND, AND DO YOU REMEMBER THAT, WAS THAT A PATTERN?

Robertson: Not—now there were some people who came on the campus. I can remember the day that Meredith came on the campus to the Continuing Education Center and Barnett was there. There was someone standing next to me, a man, standing next to me who said, I came all the way from Texas for this, which surprised me. I do know that there were, at various times, people from off the campus, but, of course, a lot of them were news people. We had a large influx of news people who came on the campus. So there, there were people that, that were strangers who were not students who were there in the weeks in the early fall.

00:08:52:00

INTERVIEWER: WERE, WERE YOU AFRAID OF ANY VIOLENCE? AND WHAT—DID IT LOOK TO YOU LIKE IT WAS GETTING TENSE AND, AND DANGEROUS AT ALL?

Robertson: No. I was not afraid. There had been no real, real violence or even real threats of violence. Indeed we were told that there would be no show of force from any, you know, from state government, Federal Government or anyone as long as the campus was calm and there was no violence. That's why it was such a surprise when the marshals came on the campus because this hadn't happened, and—

INTERVIEWER: WE'LL GET TO THAT POINT.

Robertson: Yeah. OK.

INTERVIEWER: THAT WAS—CAN WE STOP FOR A MOMENT?

[cut]

00:09:39:00

[slate]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: MARK IT.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: MARKER.

INTERVIEWER: COULD YOU TELL US WHAT YOU SAW WHEN THE GOVERNOR WAS THERE STOPPING MEREDITH?

Robertson: Students gathered in small groups in, in the grove outside the Continuing Education Center. They were curious. There were townspeople who were there and there were people from outside of Oxford. As far as the students were concerned there was really more of a pep rally atmosphere. They would just, you know, kind of talk and they wanted to see the Governor and they wanted to see James Meredith. They didn't know what he looked like and they would—well, the time that Meredith came on campus and when the Lieutenant Governor was on campus and Governor Barnett was on campus you would hear, you know, two, four, six, eight, we don't want to integrate. And that was the kind of an atmosphere. There was not an ugly atmosphere. There was not even an angry atmosphere. There was—curiosity was, I guess the, the prevailing mood.

00:10:51:00

INTERVIEWER: LET ME ASK YOU ABOUT THE NEWSMEN COVERING THE MEREDITH CASE. YOU, YOU TOLD US A STORY ABOUT A FLAG INCIDENT. I THINK I'D LIKE TO HEAR AND WHAT YOU THINK THAT SAYS ABOUT THE—

Robertson: I was, I was very impressed with the number of the newsmen who came to cover it, but I was also very upset by some of the actions of some of the newsmen who were there. I think some of them, when there was no news wanted to create news and I saw one incident that I think would illustrate what I'm talking about. This was on one of the days that we were expecting the Governor. And people were gathered in the circle outside the Lyceum and there's a flagpole that flies the American flag and there were some students gathered around there and nothing was really going on. There hadn't been anything of a news nature. And some of the reporters, there was a magazine reporter and there were, I think, some newspaper reporters, had suggested to some of the students who were gathered around, you know, why

don't you pull down the flag and put up the Confederate flag? And, and some of them had reached to do that, had reached for the chain and, and were being encouraged and, in fact, there was a cameraman who was taking pictures. And the vice-president of the student body, Gray Jackson and two or three student leaders came up to them and said, don't do that. You know. Don't, don't desecrate our flag and don't play into their hands. Don't, don't create an image that's, you know, that's, that's not true of, you know, of our students. And so they didn't do it and you could tell by the expressions of disgust on the faces of some of the newsmen they were really disappointed that they didn't and they just, they didn't have a story. And I saw a lot of playing to stereotypes there instead of digging for the true story.

INTERVIEWER: STOP FOR A MOMENT AND SEE WHERE WE ARE.

[cut]

00:13:16:00

[slate]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: MARKER.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: MARKER.

INTERVIEWER: WHAT DID YOU THINK THE UNIVERSITY AND THE STA—AND THE STATE WERE DOING?

Robertson: Two different things. The University was trying to remain calm, to encourage the students to remain calm not to become violent. On the other hand, state leaders and officials were encouraging, you know, this attitude of we're fighting back. We've got to stand up and fight for, you know what I believe in and, you know, I'll fight them all the way down. There was a very different message coming from the University and from state officials.

INTERVIEWER: LET'S, LET'S CHANGE ROLLS AND LET ME ASK YOU ABOUT ONE OF THOSE SITUATIONS, WHICH—

[cut]

00:14:08:00

[slate]

[change to camera roll 229]

[change to sound roll 1162]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: MARK IT, PLEASE.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: MARKER.

INTERVIEWER: YOU WERE GOING TO TELL ME, WHEN HE GETS OUT—YOU GOING OUT THE DOOR?

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: YES.

INTERVIEWER: YOU WERE GONNA TELL ME ABOUT THE OLE MISS-KENTUCKY GAME AND, AND WHAT YOUR FRIEND SAID TO YOU ABOUT IT.

Robertson: All right. OK. I wasn't at the Ole Miss-Kentucky game, but I did talk to someone who was there. And many people feel that the riot started at the Ken- at the, at the Ole Miss-Kentucky game. This particular person was someone who was not an admirer of Ross Barnett. And indeed in previous visits to the campus, the Governor had even been booed. He was not a particular hero of the Ole Miss students, but this person said that Barnett started to address the crowd and he whipped them into this emotional frenzy and everyone got so caught up and he said, you know, even though I disagree with everything that the man stood for, he said, I got caught up in it too. If he had said, you know, let's charge, right then, I would have charged right along with the rest of them. And he said it was just this, you know, this huge emotional feeling with the entire crowd being caught up in it. And it was kind of, you know, us against everybody else, and I, and that I think, held over. Ole Miss was a suitcase campus at that time. People went home for—on weekends or they went to an out of town football game. And so, the campus was practically deserted until people came back on the campus from the football game.

00:15:54:00

INTERVIEWER: WELL I GUESS THAT, THAT TAKES US PRETTY MUCH UP TO THE NIGHT OF THE RIOTS, DOESN'T IT? COULD YOU TELL US ABOUT YOUR FIRST INKLING THAT IT WAS GOING WRONG. FIRST SEEING THE MARSHALS?

Robertson: All right. I had been contacted by Chancellor Williams at my home and asked to come back early. We wanted to put out a special edition of the Mississippian. It did not publish on Mondays. But we were to have a special edition asking people to remain calm not to congregate in large groups. At that particular point he was expecting Meredith on the campus the next day. And so, we were to have that out, bright and early Monday morning. When I got to the campus, I went to my sorority house and as I was walking out the door a truck passed by with some men in some bright orange vests. And, naturally, being a reporter, I followed them to see where they were going to go. And I followed them to the Lyceum and they got out and they encircled the Lyceum. And at this particular point there had been, you know, there had been no incidence that would warrant any, you know, any show of any kind of force. Most of them wouldn't talk, but I asked the man who seemed to be in charge and he said that they were U.S. Marshals and other than that they wouldn't say why they were there. They were just there. They had teargas guns and some teargas projectiles, but I went to each one of them and I did not see any other kind of weapon on any of the marshals. I went, then, down to the Mississippian office where the Chancellor was waiting. And I said, Chancellor,

what are the marshals doing around the Lyceum? And he got this very surprised and stricken look on his face and said, you know, where are they? And I said, they're at the Lyceum, and he said, let's, you know, let's go. And I got in his car with him and he drove up to the Lyceum and he went in and that's the last I saw of him. From then on people started coming back on the campus. At one point, they were stopping people at the entrances. They were Mississippi highway patrolmen. They were later withdrawn. I later found out that there were any number of people streaming onto the campus through the woods, coming over the railroad tracks and back ways. *Students came and, of course, they saw the marshals. I know I got angry when I saw the marshals. It, it just, it seemed a betrayal. It made me mad, you know, why are these people here when we haven't done anything and people have behaved [laughs] themselves and, you know, what is going on? And I caught myself, really, with some of these feelings.* They came on campus the first real—the mood changed as it got darker. Every other thing that had happened on campus preceding that had happened during the day. I discovered that night that people will do things under the cover of darkness they would never do in the light of day. I saw people absolutely change in demeanor and attitude. *I, there was one freshman girl that had been this little flower of southern gentility when I had met her, and she came up to me and her face was absolutely contorted and I almost didn't recognize her. And she was absolutely furious because she had picked up a brick and thrown it at a marshal and it had only hit him in the head and scratched him and she had not put his eye out.* And I just—she was a completely changed person. She was not, you know, the person that I had known. People got caught up. The first real violent action: a Movietone news cameraman and his wife came on campus in the car. They started filming. We had had a panty raid earlier in the year and the University had said that they were going to hire a cameraman and if you were photographed in the, in a panty raid then it would be grounds for dismissal. A lot of people thought they were the University camera people. And so, they started rocking the car trying to get his camera. And sma—you, you know, and were smashing the camera. Try to turn the car over. I climbed up on the hood of a car and was taking pictures with my camera and then, suddenly, Bill Street from the Commercial Appeal, grabbed me by the skirt and said, get down from there, you idiot. And I looked around suddenly and realized that I was surrounded by a sea of very hostile faces. And Bill said, she's with the Mississippian, which gave me time to get back down from the, from the hood of the car. They were smashing cameras. Any, any reporter that had a camera it was smashed. And I walked over and put my camera in the safe at the old Y, but some policemen had to come and rescue this cameraman and the woman who was with him. And they eventually set fire to some cars that they turned over. There was a Volkswagen as I remember. But that's when it started to get ugly.

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INTERVIEWER: DO YOU THINK THE FEELING WAS, WELL IF WE CAN JUST SHOW THAT WE'RE NOT GONNA TAKE IT, MAYBE THE LAWYERS CAN'T STOP THIS, MAYBE THE COURTS CAN'T STOP IT, BUT WE CAN STOP IT.

Robertson: I don't think there was any reason—that implies a reasoning, you know, starting at, you know, one premise and reaching a conclusion. People were reacting with emotion. They came, they saw things had been building up. You know, we'd expect something to

happen and then nothing happened. And, as I said, I think they had been pumped up at the football game. They came, they saw the Lyceum surrounded by men in, in a form of uniform. But still things still didn't get extremely ugly until they brought in some reinforcements. Some men in military uniforms and one of the trucks was driven by a black man. And people started saying hey, it's Meredith. They're sneaking him in. They're disguising him. And then things really got ugly. There were Molotov cocktails thrown. There were—the, the mood of the crowd really changed. It was shortly after that that the first barrage of tear gas was fired. Had I been in the position of the marshals I probably would have fired much sooner. I mean things were really—it, it was very frightening. There had been students, some student leaders who had tried to talk to people and had—and a lot of students had gone back to their dormitories, but the highway patrol left. Before they left I went up to a highway patrolman. I saw a man on a building adjacent to the Lyceum, on the roof, and I, and I said, there's a man up there with a gun. Don't you think you should do—

00:24:11:00

[cut]

[wild audio]

Robertson: —something about it? And he said oh, don't you trouble yourself little lady. And that was what, you know, that, that was the attitude of the law enforcement officers. I think we had three or four campus policemen on the whole staff and they did what they could, but they were completely outnumbered.

INTERVIEWER: STOP YOU.

Robertson: I'm sorry. I went too much—I—

INTERVIEWER: IT'S ALL RIGHT. IT'S ALL RIGHT. I GOT WRAPPED UP IN IT.

00:24:40:00

[cut]

[slate]

[change to camera roll 230]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: THIS IS CAMERA ROLL TWO-THREE-ZERO. MARKER.

INTERVIEWER: GENTLEMEN OUT THE DOOR. AND THEN IF YOU WOULD TELL US WHERE, TELL US—YOU WERE JUST TELLING ME, AGAIN, WHAT PEOPLE WERE THINKING ABOUT.

Robertson: All right. It was a very strong emotional response. It was just this Mississippi and Ole Miss against the world. They're not gonna tell us what to do. We're not gonna be pushed around. I think that was the governing emotion and, and reasoning behind it. It was a gut level response. And it was for, for those who came on the campus from all over. I mean from surrounding states. It just happened that—Ole Miss happened to be the battleground. And this was the chance to fight for states rights, for the southern way of life, and for all those people that, you know, that just wanted to fight back, they chose Ole Miss as the place to do it. Before it was over, there were a small majority—a small minority, really, of students who were there, but people from all over. They had been called in. There were some of the radio stations in Mississippi and in Alabama, that it said, go to the Ole Miss campus. You know, fight, you know, for our way of life. Don't let 'em shove us around. And they came. And they came, they came ready to fight. We had a member of the business staff that came—

INTERVIEWER: I'M GONNA STOP YOU THERE.

Robertson: OK. Excuse me, all right.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: I NEED TO CUT.

[cut]

00:26:26:00

[slate]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: MARK.

INTERVIEWER: MARKER.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: MARGARITAS.

INTERVIEWER: RIGHT. GO AHEAD.

Robertson: All right. The day after the riot, I remember, getting up and going in to brush my teeth in the sorority house and there was a ravine behind the house and I looked down and there were men in military uniforms encamped there. I was very relieved to see them there because it had been a very frightening night. You heard the sound of gunfire, but you really didn't know what was going on. Most people were back in their dormitories or their fraternity or sorority houses. There was tear gas everywhere. You—most people just really didn't go out. There were a few classes that met and I went to—I tried to go to one, but the, the tear gas was so bad you couldn't, you, you couldn't stay there. There was this—kind of a stunned silence. You saw very few people out on the campus—very few students or faculty. A lot of people went home. Their parents wanted them to get home. You didn't know what on earth was going on. But at that particular time you could believe anything could happen. There was, you know, there was some anger, but there was just this stunned disbelief that this had

happened on our campus and you weren't really sure what had happened if you, you know, hadn't been there.

00:28:14:00

INTERVIEWER: DID YOU KNOW THAT JAMES MEREDITH HAD BEEN ENROLLED?

Robertson: I had—I, I did because I, I, I was managing editor of the paper and I found out and so we had—

INTERVIEWER: WHAT DO YOU THINK—DO YOU THINK SOMETHING WAS CHANGED BY HIS ENROLMENT?

Robertson: [pause] In what way do you ask that? Ok, yeah.

INTERVIEWER: WAS SOMETHING WON OR LOST?

Robertson: Oh yes, I think something was won. I think so. [laughs] The right of a person regardless of race to attend the school of his choice. Things changed from that point on. It was a turning point in Mississippi history. It was a turning point for, for Ole Miss. Now, you see students attending classes, you see them talking with each other, black and white students on the campus. Things like that just wouldn't have, you know, have happened. People see each other now as people not as a black or other terms or a white.

00:29:24:00

INTERVIEWER: LET ME TURN THE OTHER WAY THEN.

Robertson: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: WAS SOMETHING LOST THAT DAY?

Robertson: [pause] I think innocence was lost. I think the University reputation was damaged terribly because we would always be associated with a, a race riot. You think of Ole Miss and pe—you think of Meredith. You think of the riots there. Even I remember there was a, a wire photo that appeared in several magazines and there were Mississippi State University students who were throwing rocks at troops. They had “Mississippi State University” on the backs of their jackets and the cut line said, Ole Miss Students Throw Rocks. It was, it was as if we were the only people who were involved in it. And it, it changed the way that I will look at people and it, it changed the way that I, I looked at people of other races. I think it changed the way that a lot of students who were there. I don't think that most of ‘em thought that it would ever come to real, real violence. Yes, you had, you had some people—you had KKK members and, you know, and they would resort to violence. But most people didn't. And I think they were stunned.

00:31:03:00

INTERVIEWER: DID YOU SEE MEREDITH ON CAMPUS THAT FALL WALKING AROUND WITH MEN FOLLOWING HIM?

Robertson: You saw him very little. He was escorted to campus. He had very little contact with the other students. He had Justice Department people who went everywhere with him. Some students, one time, who ate with him in the cafeteria, one female student returned to her, her dorm room and ink had been thrown and bleach had been thrown over her clothes. And after that you really didn't—there was very little contact. He was there and attending classes, but he had very little contact with the rest of the student body.

INTERVIEWER: DID YOU SEE ANY OF THE—STOP PLEASE.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: EXCUSE ME. THIRTY SECONDS.

INTERVIEWER: NO, STOP PLEASE.

00:31:49:00

[cut]

[wild audio]

INTERVIEWER: LET ME THINK IF I REALLY WANT ANY MORE.

Robertson: OK. Excuse me.

INTERVIEWER: I'VE JUST KIND OF BEEN FOLLOWING MY NOSE ON THIS.

Robertson: OK [laughs].

[cut]

[end of interview.]

00:31:55:00

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