

Interview with **Thomas R. Waring**

October 25, 1985

Charleston, South Carolina

Production Team: A

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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

[sound roll 1101]

[wild audio]

Waring: My name is Thomas R. Waring, W-A-R-I-N-G, and I'm a retired newspaper editor. I was fifty years in newspaper work. Started it on my graduation from the University of the South at Sewanee, Tennessee—

00:00:21:00

[cut]

[camera roll 101]

[slate]

Waring: —and was hired June 20, 1927 as a newspaper reporter at fifteen dollars a week. I'm ready.

INTERVIEWER: HERE WE GO. NOW JUST REMEMBER THIS IS JUST A CONVERSATION BETWEEN THE TWO OF US. ALL THESE OTHER PEOPLE DON'T EXIST. YOU'RE JUST TALKING TO ME. OK?

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: LET ME TAKE ONE MOMENT TO GET SETTLED HERE.

INTERVIEWER: NOW THIS, THIS FIRST QUESTION IS, COULD YOU GIVE US A SORT OF BRIEF WORD PICTURE OF LIFE IN THE SOUTH, AT THIS POINT, THE EARLY 1950S, PARTICULARLY, IN TERMS OF RACE RELATIONS?

Waring: Well, in the 1950s in Charleston were a quiet time. It was between world wars. Charleston had been a sleepy old southern city for a hundred years. The aftermath of the Civil War had been quite difficult for the South, generally, and Charleston too. And World War I brought in some new employment and additional economic developments, but not nearly as much as World War II was to do in later years. So the 1950s were in-between time. Insofar as race relations go, we, we old settlers, and I speak as one whose family goes back nine generations from me, we thought we had very good, amicable relations with—between the races. And we were somewhat taken aback by the vehemence of the movements that went on to knock down what were called segregation laws and customs. Many of which aren't even spelled out. They're just everybody sort of knew how things worked and were reasonably happy with them.

00:02:20:00

INTERVIEWER: THAT'S, THAT'S A WONDERFUL ANSWER. THAT'S TERRIFIC. MAYBE YOU COULD ELABORATE A LITTLE BIT ABOUT SEGREGATION, PARTICULARLY, ABOUT WHAT THE—WHAT IT MEANT “SEPARATE BUT EQUAL” THAT CONCEPT THAT, THAT THE SOUTH WORKED ON.

Waring: Well, the way I was brought up to look at it is a [coughs] mutual respect for the qualities and limitations of both races. It is true that economically and socially, for the most part, the colored people were on a different level from the white people. Not that poverty is a racial characteristic, but there just was not a very large black mu—middle class in the South at that time. And a great deal of the segregation was just the way people happened to be born, where they lived, and how they grew up. And the schools were separate. And, there was a—certainly a cultural difference, some of which is racial, and some of which is economic and some of which is social. And when the, [coughs] when the school desegregation movement began to get into even a broader field and threatening violence and, as it, as it did break out in demonstrations in some parts of the country, why it, it changed the whole aspect of race relations. I think, on the whole, the southern people of both races have responded reasonably well to the changes. We've avoided some of the horrors that racial conflict would bring on our country and looking back over the thirty years, I think, we've been rather lucky in how we have weathered the changes that have come about.

00:04:25:00

INTERVIEWER: LET'S, LET'S GO BACK TO THAT, THAT PERIOD THIRTY YEARS AGO AND DO YOU THINK THAT—I—THAT PEOPLE EXPECTED THAT THE SUPREME COURT WAS GOING TO STRIKE DOWN THIS SEGREGATED SYSTEM?

Waring: Well, it's very difficult to read the minds of the Supreme Court or any other political

body. I think many southerners felt the time had come to accept changes and many others felt the time had not come. That there was still a cultural gap between the races that, that would make it very difficult to carry on public school education in the formative years of children's lives when they came from such totally different backgrounds and had different codes of behavior and different viewpoints on, on how to behave. So, *it was quite a shock to southerners to be told that the way they had been running their affairs for many, many years was no longer acceptable to the nation as a whole. And a great many of the older crowd of white south-, southerners felt that they had, that they came of an ancestry that were founders of the republic and that knew the Constitution and customs and laws of the country as well as anybody else*, in any other reason [sic]. There were strong advocates of states' rights even though the Civil War had curtailed states' rights to some extent it had not exploded them altogether. And so, the, the southern—the white southerners, especially, and some of the black southerners too, resented the power of the Federal Government interfering with how we had lived our lives for many, many years.

00:06:29:00

INTERVIEWER: THAT'S WONDERFUL. COULD YOU STOP FOR A MOMENT?

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: THAT'S GREAT, YEAH.

INTERVIEWER: THAT'S WONDERF—

[cut]

00:06:36:00

Waring: You want me to repeat on this?

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: TAKE TWO.

INTERVIEWER: WE'LL JUST, JUST START AS SOON AS WE GO ON. LET HIM GET HIMSELF A LITTLE SETTLED HERE AND I'LL JUST, I'LL JUST ASK YOU TO DESCRIBE THIS.

Waring: Well, the separation of the races, either by law or by custom, is a very broad and complex subject and difficult to summarize in, in a brief space of time. But, but the schools, schools situation is very important, of course, because it takes the children at a formative time. And many white southerners did not want their children to be brought up with what it was—in the middle of what is a different culture in the close quarters and permanency of a, a public school education. They felt that, they felt—the white southerners felt that they had been running their own affairs through states' rights for many, many years and that they were better capable of handling these things than people from elsewhere. And they therefore resented the movement to change the laws which had been part of the country from the

founding of the Republic to take a different way of handling such important matters as education. There were many other aspects of seg—segregation which, of course, it was time to make changes, particularly in the field of public service in restaurants, hotels, public transportation. It was time to get rid of the back-of-the-bus mentality and accept a new, new step in race relations. But, but the white southerners as a whole were unwilling, however, to, at this time, at that time, at any rate, to include the schools in the changes. They thought that the time had not yet reached the point where the races had sufficiently compatible lifestyles to put the children together.

INTERVIEWER: COULD YOU STOP FOR A MOMENT, PLEASE?

[cut]

00:08:53:00

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: ROLLING.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: THREE.

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: THAT WAS A THREE.

INTERVIEWER: RIGHT. IF YOU'LL HOLD FOR A MOMENT WHILE THEY SET THE CAMERA.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: OK, JUDITH IT'S ALL YOURS.

Waring: I was speaking of the back of the bus which was a particularly irritating aspect for the, for the colored people of the South. Many southerners were quite ready and—to make a change in transitory contacts with, with the other race. With no segregation standing in line at the post office or in the banks and people passed each other in the streets without any problem. In fact, many, many white people had house servants who were on close, intimate terms with the family and with close, friendly relations over periods of years. Families knowing each other well. White southerners were completely at home in, in associating with colored people. And for, for those reasons there were many aspects of segregation that could easily be remedied and were as, as the in—colored individuals grew into the middle class way of, way of living. But that did not extend in the, in the opinion of white southerners I—as I understood it and as a newspaperman I had, had made it my business to try to get a feeling for how the public felt that they were not ready to, to open the schools to the two races together.

INTERVIEWER: THERE THAT'S VERY, VERY NICE. STOP FOR A MOMENT.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: EXCELLENT.

[cut]

00:10:46:00

INTERVIEWER: EVERY TIME WE STOP, WE HAVE TO PLAY WITH THAT—

[sync tone]

INTERVIEWER: —LITTLE BUTTON THERE.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: THAT'S FOUR.

INTERVIEWER: WAIT JUST A MINUTE, WHILE HE SETS HIS FRAME.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: IT'S—

Waring: I was speaking of cultural relationships and, of course, the—again, it's a very broad subject and I can't make any attempt to be too—

00:11:04:00

[cut]

[wild audio]

Waring: —specific about it, but in the matter of associations—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: OH SIR, THAT'S MY MISTAKE.

INTERVIEWER: EXCUSE ME.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: WE JUST RAN OUT.

INTERVIEWER: I'M SORRY. GIVE YOU A MO—

00:11:10:00

[cut]

[slate]

[change to camera roll 102]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: THE CAMERA'S ROLLING.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: ONE-O-TWO, SLATE FIVE.

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: LET ME GET SETTLED HERE.

INTERVIEWER: WAIT JUST A MINUTE WHILE HE SETTLES HIMSELF IN AND THEN WE'LL ASK YOU ABOUT THIS KIND OF DETAIL ON THE DIFFERENCES THAT YOU WERE—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: JUDITH IT'S ALL YOURS.

INTERVIEWER: OK.

Waring: In discussing the differences of cultural aspects of the racial situation, of course, it's again a very broad subject and difficult to generalize on, because it involves so many different individuals. But it's only just, in general, speaking generally, at the time, some of the colored people's customs were not, not totally acceptable to the white people. In that they were careless about their marital relations and health situations. They were quite often, again, careless and the, the backgrounds in which their children were raised were not—they didn't have many books or reading matter and the, the children just simply weren't on the same level as the white children. If they were put in by—into the grades by ages it would disrupt the educational quality of the, of the white people. And for that reason, the white people were not ready yet to merge the schools. They thought that a, a time should be allowed for the colored people to raise their own cultural levels before they would fit into the mixed, mixed lifestyle.

INTERVIEWER: THAT'S, THAT'S GONNA BE VERY [unintelligible]. STOP FOR A MOMENT BECAUSE I WANT TO—

[cut]

00:13:09:00

Waring: You got that now.

INTERVIEWER: NO, NO, WE'RE GONNA—I'M GOING TO ASK YOU THAT RIGHT NOW. I WANTED TO WAIT UNTIL YOU WERE—

[sync tone]

INTERVIEWER: —HEAR ABOUT, ABOUT IT.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: COULD YOU?

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: SIX.

INTERVIEWER: IF YOU COULD, IF YOU COULD TELL ME THAT AGAIN. WHAT WOULD—WOULD—WOULD THE WHITE SOUTH HAVE MADE THIS EFFORT?

Waring: The question of whether the white South [coughs] or the southern states which were dominated in, in politics and economics by the white race, whether [coughs] these people would actually have made the schools equal, if separated, but the Federal Government took the initiative in declaring it unconstitutional to keep separate schools and so the souther—southerners never had the opportunity to do what would be necessary to make the schools equal. And so the upshot of it is that they probably are not of a very good quality for either race.

INTERVIEWER: OH THAT'S VERY, VERY NICE.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: WE'RE STILL ROLLING.

INTERVIEWER: YEAH, STOP FOR A MOMENT.

[cut]

00:14:14:00

INTERVIEWER: AND I'LL ASK YOU THE QUESTION AGAIN—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: SEVEN.

INTERVIEWER: —SO THAT YOU CAN, YOU CAN START YOUR ANSWER. WHICH IS, COULD YOU TELL ME ABOUT, A LITTLE BIT ABOUT MASSIVE RESISTANCE AND HOW SURPRISED YOU WERE THAT IT WAS THIS PEACEFUL?

Waring: Well, the “massive resistance” was just one of the phrases [coughs] used in an effort to coalesce public opinion among white people in the South and to let [coughs] the rest of the country know about it and it, it had some overtones which would in, would, perhaps, be a little on the dangerous side, meaning an invitation to white people to demonstrate and be disorderly in the streets as, as some of the black people were doing in their demands for quote “equal rights” unquote. And I was agreeably surprised that such violence did not develop and, I think, it, it, it is a tribute to the people of both races that those things did not develop. I think there was an underlying feeling of good will of both races, so that they did not carry out the “burn, baby burn” policy of making life too tough for white people to resist. And the “massive resistance” was just one of the catch words—terms that was used to try to encourage white people to express themselves. I think it had some limited success, but in the, in the long run, of course, it didn't work, because the South was outnumbered and outgunned again. Lost a, a cause. But the cause is not really gone yet. We haven't got the end of the story.

00:16:05:00

INTERVIEWER: NOW IN SOME PLACES, WE WERE TALKING ABOUT SCHOOLS BEFORE, IN SOME PLACES, MASSIVE RESISTANCE LED THE SCHOOLS TO SHUT—THE, THE WHITE PEOPLE TO SHUT DOWN THE SCHOOL SYSTEMS.

Waring: There were instances of it, but I don't think there was ever any shut-down of a whole system. I think a school here and there were closed, but my recollection is that [coughs] that we just muddled through it somehow.

INTERVIEWER: THAT'S IN SOUTH CAROLINA, YOU MEAN.

Waring: In South Carolina—

INTERVIEWER: CAUSE—

Waring: —and other states with which I am familiar.

INTERVIEWER: NOW, I THINK VIRGINIA DID SHUT DOWN A WHOLE SCHOOL SYSTEM.

Waring: They did.

INTERVIEWER: IN PRINCE EDWARD. DO YOU REMEMBER THAT?

Waring: At Farmville, Virginia.

INTERVIEWER: YEAH. DO YOU REMEMBER THE FARMVILLE CASE? COULD YOU TELL—DO YOU REMEMBER ANYTHING ABOUT THAT?

Waring: I remember that at Farmville, Virginia—the vicinity was known as south side Virginia in the vicinity of Farmville, the—a, a school system, whether it was a county or a district or what, I don't remember, but something did shut down and there was no school there at all. And the white people sent their children to private schools which were hastily organized. But that was not a general situation throughout the South. It was a, it was an exceptional case.

00:17:20:00

INTERVIEWER: OK. THE OTHER DOCTRINE THAT'S TALKED ABOUT AT THIS TIME IS INTERPOSITION, WHICH AGAIN, IN SOUTH CAROLINA WAS NOT BIG, BUT COULD—DO YOU REMEMBER THAT? COULD YOU—

Waring: I remember the word “interposition,” yes. It was an effort to reestablish the states' rights principle and that this is a Republic not a democracy. And that interposition was talked about and was implemented in some ways. The details of which I do not now remember.

INTERVIEWER: DO YOU REMEMBER IT AS A, AS A, AS A THEORETICAL POINT?

DO YOU THINK THAT IT WAS A THREAT TO THE, THE SYSTEM OF GOVERNMENT OR DO YOU THINK THAT, I THINK, THAT THE OTHER ARGUMENT MIGHT BE THAT IT WAS CENTRAL TO OUR SYSTEM.

Waring: Well, of course, you might say the, the end result would be secession. And I don't think anybody in the South thought for one moment about secession or resumption of a Civil War. I think they hoped to keep the, the conflict on the level of legal procedures in which interposition was one.

00:18:31:00

INTERVIEWER: THE ONLY REAL CASE OF INTERPOSITION THAT GOT VERY DANGEROUS, OF COURSE, WAS JAMES MEREDITH AT OLE MISS AND I WONDERED, AS A REPORTER, ABOUT THE COVERAGE, ABOUT THE SYMPATHY TO, TO THE, TO THE MISSISSIPPI POSITION. DO YOU REMEMBER THAT?

Waring: Yes. We, we sent a reporter to Mississippi to look into the—from, from our point of view. I don't remember the details of it. I remember, of course, the James Meredith case and, and it was a very sorrowful event. And it was the kind of thing that did, did give responsible people a pause as to how far shall we go in, in making the resistance. George Wallace standing at the schoolhouse door and things of that sort happening through—and the troops being called into Arkansas. It, it got very, very touchy, rugged and dangerous. And it was a perilous situation and, again, I, I must repeat that I think it is a great tribute to the underlying good will between the races and the common sense of the majority of—in both white and black, that fighting did not erupt and there was not a breakdown in, in civil government.

00:19:57:00

INTERVIEWER: DO YOU REMEMBER THE SENTIMENT OF—AROUND THE MISSISSIPPI CASE IN—AT OLE MISS? IN THIS AREA? DID—HOW PEOPLE FELT ABOUT THAT?

Waring: Well, again, I think that—I, I don't remember the details, the day-to-day details of these things. They sort of merge in, into the past of just things that happened and I would have to read up about it to be sure of what was what and who did what when. But, generally speaking, I think these were just incidents of the kind of thing that can happen when you interfere with the deep convictions of American citizens.

INTERVIEWER: I THINK THAT'S VERY IMPORTANT. COULD YOU STOP FOR A MOMENT? THAT'S—

[cut]

00:20:46:00

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: EIGHT.

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: THAT WAS AN EIGHT. LET ME GET SETTLED
HERE FOR ONE MOMENT, MR. WARING. OK.

Waring: On the separate, but equal subject that we have discussed, of course, there was, there were valid complaints that in many areas of the South the, the schools for colored people were inferior. Both insofar as the buildings were concerned and also the money expended. But you must remember that the South was in a—not a rich part of the country and many of the country schools for white people were, were also inadequate and, I think, that the white people felt an obligation to provide better schooling for the white—for the blacks and would get around to doing something about it, but perhaps it was slow. And, they were slow for one reason, because as I said they were poor. Poor people and these are poor neighborhoods. The, the black people themselves, because they were in a lower economic bracket, did not—

00:22:06:00

[cut]

[wild audio]

Waring: —contribute much in the way of tax money.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: WE'VE JUST RUN OUT.

INTERVIEWER: THAT WAS JUST—THAT WAS AL—

[cut]

00:22:11:00

[slate]

[change to camera roll 103]

INTERVIEWER: WILL MAKE IT IMPOSSIBLE TO DEAL WITH.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: NO.

INTERVIEWER: THANK YOU.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: NINE.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: GO AHEAD.

[sync tone]

INTERVIEWER: LET US JUST GET OUR FRAMING HERE AND THEN IF YOU'D JUST PICK UP AT THE END OF THAT THOUGHT ABOUT THE TAXES. I THINK—

Waring: And because of the—

INTERVIEWER: JUST, JUST A MOMENT, PLEASE.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: OK.

Waring: Ready?

INTERVIEWER: YES.

Waring: Because of the la—lack of a solid tax base in the rural sections where many of the black people lived, of course, the, the schools were inferior and—but I think the southern states have made an effort, both through state aid and, and also because there've been a movement away from the rural areas into the towns and cities that more money has become available to improve the school systems and that is now being done.

00:23:03:00

INTERVIEWER: I THINK, REALLY, THE, THE LAST THING I, I MIGHT ASK YOU IS THERE ANYTHING ELSE THAT YOU THINK WOULD BE HELPFUL FOR OUR AUDIENCE TO KNOW ABOUT THIS PERIOD, IN TERMS OF THE, THE INTENTIONS AND THE MIND OF THE WHITE SOUTH IN THE, IN THE AFTERMATH OF THIS VERY SURPRISING—THIS, THIS VERY DIFFICULT DECISION?

Waring: Well, I think that it is in—that it is necessary that people of all persuasions try to remove any bitterness that may have occurred before or after or during this difficult period that we're living in. Difficulty is still there. We have a terrific crime rate and, unfortunately, a great deal of it is—comes from the black people. Blacks on blacks. The black people themselves are suffering from crime and, and all of the bad points of poverty and lack of, frankly, lack of training and discipline. And I think it's incumbent on all people to reserve their judgements and try to deal with situations as they are and not just blow off and invite serious difficulties.

00:24:29:00

INTERVIEWER: AND IN TERMS OF—IF YOU THINK ABOUT THE SAME QUESTION OF, OF WHAT ELSE MIGHT BE USEFUL TO KNOW, IN TERMS OF 1954, '55, '56, IS THERE ANY OTHER IMPORTANT POINT OF VIEW OF THE, OF, OF—IN TERMS OF YOUR CONVICITONS, THAT YOU THINK WE SHOULD KNOW?

Waring: Other than to counsel peaceful and sensible, common-sense approaches to the problem—

INTERVIEWER: OH NO, NO. I MEANT IN TERMS OF—FOR EXAMPLE, WE TALKED ABOUT THE PAPER CURTAIN. THE KINDS OF THINGS THAT WERE NOT IN THE NORTHERN PRESS AT THAT TIME.

Waring: Well, I'm—if, if there was a paper curtain at the time and I was one who used that term, whether I invented it or just borrowed it from somebody I'm not sure, but I used it frequently. I think the paper curtain is still there. I don't, I don't think that the, that the sympath—the sympathetic view of the white southerner's case has, has yet become generally available. I, I think that more sympathy and understanding should be given to what in some cases now is a minority. In the city of Charleston, for instance, the white people are a minority. I don—I'm—don't think that we should be crying for sympathy and help. I think we ought to just all try to understand one another's problems and we've got them.

INTERVIEWER: WELL, THANK YOU. I THINK IF WE STOP—

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:26:19:00

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