Interview with **Erle Johnston**
November 8, 1985
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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.*

00:00:01:00

[camera roll 334]

[sound roll 1317]

[wild audio]

INTERVIEWER: I'LL JUST ASK YOU QUESTIONS STARTING WITH

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: SPEED

INTERVIEWER: A LITTLE BIT OF AND IDEA OF WHAT MISSISSIPPI–

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2. AND YOU CAN MARK.

INTERVIEWER: –WAS LIKE.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: MARK.

[sync tone]

INTERVIEWER: YOU'LL HEAR MY QUESTIONS. OK WE'RE GOING TO GET STARTED.

[sync tone]

INTERVIEWER: OK, WE'RE GOING TO GET STARTED NOW. IN THE EARLY 1960S PAINT ME A LITTLE PICTURE OF WHAT MISSISSIPPI WAS LIKE AS A PLACE TO LIVE JUST FOR REGULAR PEOPLE.

Johnston: Well those of us who lived in Mississippi thought it was the greatest place to live of all. Of course I know what you're referring to and I'll have to admit that there was a sort of a, a hysteria still in those days about the racial relations that might result as the consequence of the Supreme Court decision of 1954 and of course the courts and also the people coming in from the outside who were calling themselves civil rights workers.

INTERVIEWER: OK

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: CUT PLEASE.

INTERVIEWER: CUT.

[cut]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: MARKER.

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: DO YOU, IT WOULDN'T HURT TO REDO THAT.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: IT WOULDN'T HURT.

00:00:56:00

INTERVIEWER: OK, OK, WE'LL JUST GO, GO THROUGH THAT AGAIN. SO IN, IN THE EARLY '60S, GIVE ME A LITTLE PICTURE OF MISSISSIPPI PARTICULARLY REGARDING RELATIONSHIPS, RACE RELATIONSHIPS AND JUST EVERYDAY LIFE.

Johnston: Well, of course, I've lived in Mississippi all my life and I still say it's the greatest place to live but during those days I must admit, of course, there was a lot of strain and some of the old hysteria still existed about what was gonna happen because with the Supreme Court decision outlawing segregation and what else was going to come down the road from Congress and the courts and that did exist.

00:01:31:00

INTERVIEWER: OK, NOW, I'M TRYING TO GET A SENSE OF RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN BLACKS AND WHITES IN THE SOUTH. A LOT PEOPLE SAY THAT EVEN THOUGH THERE WAS THAT CODE OF RACIAL SEGREGATION OR SOCIAL SEGREGATION IN ONE SENSE THAT BLACKS AND WHITES HERE HAD A

CLOSER RELATIONSHIP THAN THEY DID MOST ANY OTHER PART OF THE COUNTRY. CAN YOU DESCRIBE THAT A LITTLE BIT? WHICH PART DO YOU THINK IS TRUE?

Johnston: Well, having lived so long in a, a small city, where we meet and mingle and work with blacks all the time, even back in those days, in fact I've had a, a Yankee visitor wonder where does the line start and where does it end because of the fact that we were mingling together. And consequently I think to, to most of us had more feelings for the blacks than somebody who didn't ever see them at all. Like in the big cities in the South, for instance. But we had a very good relationship in Forest where I live and I think in most of the cities in Mississippi.

INTERVIEWER: OK, GOING BACK TO THE, IN RELATIONSHIP TO THE EVENTS AT OLE MISS, WHAT WAS THE DOCTRINE OF INTERPOSITION? CAN YOU JUST EXPLAIN THAT SIMPLY? WHAT WAS THAT BASIS?

Johnston: The doctrine of interposition was probably a final straw that Governor Barnett grabbed in an attempt to keep James Meredith out of the University of Mississippi. It was an ancient doctrine whereas you could interpose between the state and the federal government but it had already been outlawed by the courts and of course Governor Barnett was just clutching anything he could in order to perpetuate his fight against the United States Government in that case.

00:03:13:00

INTERVIEWER: WHAT WERE THE FEARS OF PEOPLE IN THE STATE, BARNETT WAS JUST ONE REPRESENTATIVE OF, IN REACTION TO THE, ADMISSION OF MEREDITH TO OLE MISS. WHAT WERE PEOPLE AFRAID OF WITH OLE MISS? AND GOTTA MENTION OLE MISS.

Johnston: The big argument about integration in those days was that it might lead to intermarriage or it might lead to those things that would not be desirable and of course a lot of private schools sprung up where some of the students went in preference to going to public school because of the fear that they would be integrated. So, that was always the motivation, not so much what has happened up to now, but what's going to happen in the future because of this? Is this going to be the opening of the door?

INTERVIEWER: OPEN THE DOOR TO WHAT, THOUGH? WHAT–

Johnston: To full integration. Remember that, that the Meredith incident occurred in 1962 and, most of your public schools weren't even integrated until much later.

00:04:14:00

INTERVIEWER: OK, WERE, WERE WHITE SOUTHERNERS THEN, THEN AFRAID OF RACE-MIXING, OR WHAT, WHAT WAS THE BASIC FEAR? WHY, WHY SUCH A

STRONG REACTION TO ONE PERSON?

Johnston: I think the reaction was strong because, and some people said that all of a sudden they got conscious of it. For instance, when I was young, just a kid, we played together with black kids, we went swimming with black kids in the creek and we thought nothing about it. We played baseball, we had a lot of fun. Then all of a sudden why the, the race issue became paramount and everybody kind of said oh, my what's going to happen now, what's gonna happen now, they gonna take over they gonna get this or they gonna get that. And one thing that we always tried to point out was the fact that there was never any law requiring churches to be segregated, yet they were by choice.

00:05:12:00

INTERVIEWER: SO THEREFORE WHAT? WHAT DID YOU CONCLUDE FROM THAT?

Johnston: Well, the conclusion was in some reports that, that the blacks wanted to be among themselves anyway. Look at the churches, they didn't want to, they didn't try to integrate the white churches, they preferred their own churches. And of course, vice versa, white students tried to indica—-integrate the black churches. But–

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: WE'RE ABOUT TO RUN OUT. I THINK WE BETTER RELOAD.

INTERVIEWER: OK, WE'LL CUT RIGHT THERE, THAT'S A GOOD STOP. OK.

[cut]

[slate]

[change camera roll to 336]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: SPEED

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: AND MARK.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: MARK

[sync tone]

00:05:42:00

INTERVIEWER: DID, DID GOVERNOR BARNETT IN THE SAME VEIN EVER EXPRESS FEELINGS TO YOU OR DID YOU EVER HEAR HIM MENTION HOW HE FELT ABOUT THE TWO DEATHS THAT RESULTED FROM THE OLE MISS INCIDENT?

Johnston: Oh, he was very regretful of the, of the two deaths at Mississippi University during that period because everybody, I don't care how extreme a segregationist you were abhorred violence and spoke against the violence in any form. And of course he did say that had the Kennedies not taken the National Guard away from him and federalized them in the army that he could have prevented a lot of that that occurred at Ole Miss. But all he had under his control was the state highway patrolmen.

INTERVIEWER: HOW DID HE FEEL ABOUT THE KENNEDY'S AFTER OLE MISS? WHAT WAS GOVERNOR BARNETT'S POSITION?

Johnston: He never changed his opinion of the Kennedies at all. He was always anti-Kennedy, always.

00:06:32:00

INTERVIEWER: BUT DID IT STRENGTHEN IT OR–

Johnston: No, no. Probably made it worse.

INTERVIEWER: OK, WHAT DO YOU–

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: Let me just follow with something here. I wonder if Mr. Johnston could just tell us very briefly whether or not Governor Barnett was in fact on the telephone with the Kennedy's in the days leading up to Ole Miss in–especially on the night of the disturbances.

Johnston: Yes, Governor Barnett was on the telephone very often with not only the President but also the Attorney General because they were telling him on the telephone that Meredith was going to get into Ole Miss. And several times Governor Barnett managed to get it postponed. And he got it postponed because he said there's gonna be some violence if he gets into the university, and we don't want violence. But finally the Kennedy's kind of got out of patience, the way it turned out and they said that he was going to be there and there was going to be some marshals there and that's what exactly happened along with all these thousands of troops that came in to make sure that Meredith was in Ole Miss and was not harmed.

INTERVIEWER: HOW WOULD YOU SUMMARIZE THE FEELINGS OF WHITE MISSISSIPPIANS FOLLOWING THE OLE MISS RIOTS ABOUT THE, THE COMING IN OF FEDERAL TROOPS?

Johnston: The Saturday night before Meredith got into Ole Miss on Sunday evening, Governor Barnett was presented at the Ole Miss–Kentucky football game at the Mississippi Memorial Stadium in Jackson, and I don't think that any office holder in the history of Mississippi ever got a greater ovation than Governor Barnett, than Governor Barnett did on that particular night. Of course everybody was, was pepped up. Governor Barnett was going

to find a way to keep Meredith out of Ole Miss. They just had the confidence in him. But then, of course, after the incident occurred and after the riot and after the deaths, why, a lot of people of course were very remorseful about what happened. There were some of course who still were bitter about Meredith getting into Ole Miss, but all of them were regretful that there'd been any deaths. In fact, I think I can tell you, later, it was found out that most of those people on the Ole Miss Campus were not Mississippians, they were outsiders who had come in just to see what kind of trouble they could stir up.

00:08:56:00

INTERVIEWER: DID YOU ALL FEEL INVADED?

Johnston: Yes, several times [chuckles]. We, we felt like we were invaded from the very beginning, that people from other states came in and were set up soap, soap stools or whatever you call it [chuckles] and got on 'em and started making speeches and then of course we had the big invasion of 1964 which was planned at a college in Ohio and publicity about indicated that some of those who were, were involved were gonna give Mississippi a blood bath, in fact it was so published in the Harvard Crimson newspaper that they were going to have a blood bath. But they were undergoing a training period to try to integrate anything that was segregated in Mississippi regardless of whether it caused a fight or regardless of whatever.

INTERVIEWER: OK, LET'S CUT RIGHT THERE.

[cut]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: SPEED.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: MARK.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: MARK.

[sync tone]

00:09:58:00

INTERVIEWER: OK, SO WHEN YOU AND PEOPLE LIKE YOU, THAT IS, NATIVES, PEOPLE EDUCATED, THINKING PEOPLE WERE, FIRST HEARD OF STUDENTS COMING FROM OUTSIDE TO CHANGE THINGS SOCIALLY. HOW DID YOU FEEL?

Johnston: Well, I tell you Governor Barnett made it clear prior to the Meredith [sic] that he didn't want anybody up at Ole Miss except law enforcement personnel. He didn't want everybody from the street coming up there and getting involved and of course in the summer of 1964 when it became apparent we were gonna be invaded, I was at that time director of the Sovereignty Commission. And I remember making a speech at a city club at Canton, Mississippi in March of that year in which I made the remark—-and of course, Governor

Johnson was in office then—-that regardless of what happens, leave everything to law enforcement personnel and don't join these secret undercover groups in the hopes that it's going to do anything different, but let law enforcement personnel handle whatever happens. And that was the policy I think of Governor Johnson and it certainly was our policy too, and at that time some of the undercover groups that I said don't join were pretty powerful.

00:11:13:00

INTERVIEWER: LIKE WHAT? WHO ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT?

Johnston: Well, you could take Ku Klux Klan, you could take the American Preservation of the White Race. Those to me were extremist groups but they were very powerful, they were always trying to get me fired.

INTERVIEWER: [CHUCKLES] LET'S SEE, WE—TELL ME THAT INCIDENT ABOUT IN THE SUMMER OF 64 YOU WERE TALKING ABOUT THE INFLUENCE OF THE CITIZENS' COUNCIL IN, IN THAT TIME, WHEN, WHEN YOU WERE WALKING ACROSS THE STREET WITH THIS, AND FELL INTO STEP WITH ONE OF THE CIVIL RIGHTS WORKERS. GIVE—TELL ME THAT STORY.

Johnston: Well, of course back in those days, there was a certain hysteria that sometimes obliterated practicality or fact and I know that sometimes the finger of suspicion would be pointed at a person who might have just accidentally walked across the street with a person who was an outsider or who was a civil rights worker or who was a person who had already established some kind of reputation and just because you were going across the street together, why, the innocent person got sort of branded or at least had a finger pointed at him.

00:12:27:00

INTERVIEWER: HOW—LET'S GO BACK A LITTLE WAYS—HOW INFLUENTIAL WERE THE CITIZENS' COUNCILS SAY, IN 1962, AS AN ORGANIZATION? WHAT DID, WHAT DID THEY REPRESENT?

Johnston: Oh, they were tremendously influential.

INTERVIEWER: JUST START AGAIN WITH "THE CITIZENS' COUNCIL."

Johnston: The Citizens' Council was a tremendously influential group from the time that they were organized in 1954, in fact nearly all of the politicians, office holders, legislatures were all members of the Citizens' Council and wanted it shown in their little background information under their photos in the blue book or whatever else book was published about the legislative leaders and state leaders that they were members of the Citizens' Council. And I think that it could show you that in Governor Barnett's administration the very first meeting of the Sovereignty Commission in June 1960, the Citizens' Council asked for and got $25,000 immediately plus $5,000 a month to support their Citizens' Council forum, which was a kind of an interview type program with conservative senators or representatives or

other officials.

00:13:31:00

INTERVIEWER: AND WHAT ABOUT THE SOVEREIGNTY COMMISSION? WHAT WAS ITS PURPOSE, SAY, IN THE EARLY 60S AS AN ORGANIZATION?

Johnston: Well, the Sovereignty Commission was organized in 1956 under Governor J.P. Coleman, and Governor Coleman incidentally was not in favor of it but he went ahead and signed it and it was a very, it was really a child of the Citizens' Council. The Citizens' Council was the one that promoted the creation of the Sovereignty Commission. The Sovereignty Commission and the bill that created it never had the word segregation. The wordage was to resist federal usurpation of states' rights. And of course people perpetuate, maybe racial integrity, which of course was the theme of the Citizens' Council because the Sovereignty Commission was called a watch dog on segregation but after the Congress passed the the civil rights law in 1964 and the voting rights law in '65 really it became moot.

INTERVIIEWER: OK, LET'S CUT, STOP RIGHT THERE, THAT'S GOOD. CUT.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: LET'S HOLD ON A MINUTE.

[cut]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: MARK.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: MARK PLEASE.

[sync tone]

00:14:42:00

INTERVIEWER: OK.

Johnston: The Sovereignty commission was an agency of state government. It was not a big agency, it included the director and at one time a publicity director, no more than three investigators, they were not armed, they had no police power. The only thing they were asked to do was get information from any source they could. And when I say information, we were trying-—at least, I can speak about when I was director, I can't speak about prior to that—but we tried to get information in advance on what might happen, like for instance if there were a group was planning a boycott of a school, or if they were planning to go into a place and, and stir up any kind of trouble somewhere, where we could alert the local law enforcement personnel to be on guard. And by doing that we feel like we averted a lot of situations that could have gotten out of hand. I know in several cases we were able to get people to, both races together in a situation where they were at an impasse. And whenever I was invited to come in I became the third party, and through my contacts and both groups, I could either find out what exactly would it take, then I could make a recommendation. Say, well if this

works, fine, if it doesn't work, blame me.

INTERVIEWER: OK WHAT WERE SOME OF THE GROUPS THAT YOU WERE–

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: I THINK WE BETTER CHANG NOW.

INTERVIEWER: OK.

[cut]

[slate]

[change to camera roll 337]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: SPEED.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: AND MARK.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: MARK.

[sync tone]

00:16:16:00

INTERVIEWER: WHENEVER. JUST A LITTLE MORE SPECIFICALLY, WHAT DID THE COMMISSION DO AND WHAT WAS INVESTIGATED?

Johnston: Well, the commission, of course, after it became apparent that segregation per se was going out under the act of Congress plus all the court decisions, then we tried to be a troubleshooting communities where there were cases that could have caused problems had we not known about them in advance. And sometimes we were able to avoid that. You gotta remember that during those days there were several groups working in the name of civil rights, one was called SNCC, one was called SCEL, one was called well, one was called COFO, but COFO actually was an umbrella under which all of them worked together for that invasion of 1964. And when I mentioned that I had contacts with local groups, I'm talking about local responsible black people. At that time, the NAACP, although it was the oldest civil rights organization had really been keeping a low profile, with the killing of Medgar Evers, as tragic as it was did give the NAACP a little bit more of a boost because his brother Charles Evers came in and took his place and Charles Evers was a very aggressive person- very, very aggressive, more so than his brother. But for instance if a, if a local black group made demands on the city council or demands on the school board, and if that board would call us to see if we could help them. We were trying to find out from the black groups through our contacts what would it take really to satisfy them and never, did it take everything you asked for. We would come back in and tell the white leadership, why don't you do so and so and so and so, and then you'll avert the problem, and then, if it works fine, if it doesn't if it doesn't you blame it on me because when you're sitting around with a, with

a white structure like that, even though a lot of them knew what they had to do, nobody wanted to make the motion. So when I made the recommendations, they were acting on my recommendations and not making a motion do this or do this or do that.

00:18:36:00

INTERVIEWER: OK, SPECIFICALLY NOW, HOW DID YOU ALL PREPARE–

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: I'm sorry, I heard the battery that just went down.

INTERVIEWER: OH OK.

[cut]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: AND MARK.

[sync tone]

INTERVIEWER: BUT MORE SPECIFICALLY IN THE, IN LATE 63, EARLY 64, HOW DID THE SOVEREIGNTY, WHAT WAS THE SOVEREIGNTY COMMISSION DOING IN PREPARATION FOR WHAT THEY WERE–

Johnston: Well, during 1964, head of the COFO invasion, the Sovereignty Commission really had no, really had no responsibility at all except information and we did get information in advance about what their plans were and of course we relayed them to local law enforcement officials, we knew where they were going to be at a certain time. We relayed information to Senator Stennis and Senator Eastland about subversives who were in the group and we identified a lot of subversives who were in the civil rights movement. You say, well, how do you know they were subversives, well we, we had the list of the Senate Internal Security Committee and the House Un-American Activities Committee, and we also subscribed through another name to the communist newspapers and journals like the Daily Worker and others like that so whenever we had a name along by somebody else in Mississippi who could be identified as one of those, we would alert a lot of times the black leadership too because you know communists really were not accepted by blacks, because communist to them meant atheism. And the blacks you know, are the most religious race in the world, I expect. So whenever we could maybe reduce somebody's prestige or authority by showing them that he or she was on that communist list, it sometimes helped slow it down.

00:20:21:00

INTERVIEWER: OK AND TELL ME SO DO YOU REMEMBER THE NAME BOB MOSES AS A, A MEMBER OF SNCC?

Johnston: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: WHAT SORT OF INFORMATION DID YOU HEAR ABOUT HIM? ANYTHING IN PARTICULAR? BECAUSE I KNOW HE WAS A LEADING MEMBER–

Johnston: Well, if I have to go into names, my goodness alive, we have Bob Moses, we could have Tom Braden, Ann Braden, oh, I don't know you talking about something now that's twenty five years ago, but those were names who were on those lists. Now we did not say they were Communists, we said they were identified as being on the list of the House Un-American Activities Committee and suspected Communists as well as the Senate Internal Security Committee, which at that time Senator Eastland was the chairman of.

INTERVIEWER: I SEE, OK, NEXT THERE'S ALSO THAT THE COMMISSION HAD FILES ON THE FREEDOM DEMOCRATIC PARTY AND THAT THE MATERIAL WAS USED IN THE EFFORT TO PREVENT THE FREEDOM DEMOCRATIC PARTY FROM BEING SEATED AT THE CONVENTION. CAN YOU GIVE ME A LITTLE BACKGROUND, LEAD ME UP THROUGH THE–

Johnston: Yes, the Freedom Democratic Party was a sort of a, an organization that was formed by blacks who felt like they were not being given a fair treatment in what they called the regular Democratic Party and we knew where the Freedom Democratic Party originated, where it was organized, who were involved and we prepared a presentation for our delegation, from Mississippi to give at the National Democratic Commission, Committee-Convention excuse me, National Democratic Convention. OK, what we tried to show in that report was that the Freedom Democratic Party did not represent the majority of Democrats in Mississippi and consequently did not deserve to be seated over the regular Democrats.

00:22:24:00

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: CAN I FOLLOW UP ON ONE THING HERE?

INTERVIWER: YES.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: IF YOU COULD, YOU CAN GIVE YOUR ANSWERS TO PRUE ON THIS: YOU MENTIONED THAT THE, THE FREEDOM DEMOCRATIC PARTY WAS FORMED BY BLACKS WHO FELT THAT THEY JUST HADN'T BEEN GETTING A FAIR SHAKE WITHIN THE REGULAR DEMOCRATIC PARTY IN MISSISSIPPI. YOU, CAN YOU CLARIFY FOR ME, WAS IT YOUR SENSE THAT THEY, THE BLACKS WERE GETTING A FAIR SHAKE IN THE REGULAR DEMOCRATIC PARTY IN MISSISSIPPI IN 1964?

Johnston: Well, when you're asking on a personal opinion, I'm not going to get involved in that because after all we were all thinking about the same thing in those days. We had various degrees, we had the, the project[?] of people of which I was one and we had the extremists which I was not, but to try to say that I think they were getting a fair shake, I don't know. If you remember back in those days, there were not many of them even voting. You would have to ask them was it wrong for them not to vote. At that time, there were not many of them voting. Of course, since then it's changed.

00:23:20:00

INTERVIEWER: OK, BUT FURTHER ALONG WITH THAT, DID THE SOVEREIGNTY COMMISSION HAVE ANY POSITION ON, ON THE VOTING PROJECT, THE VOTING EDUCATION PROJECT?

Johnston: The Sovereignty Commission took the position at least I did in some, speeches that I made which was the same thing as Governor Johnson's position and that was that we needed to repeal to the come constitutional requirements about voting. That had been blamed in a way for the fact that so many of the blacks did not vote. You may have heard that they were asked crazy questions when they came to apply to vote and one of the old stories was, if I couldn't get a little humor into this conversation, was that the black man was asked to interpret a document if he was gonna vote. And really it was something it was written in Chinese and the black man says yes I can read it, it says that this man ain't gonna vote, and that was it. So that of course was the thing, when, that, I'll say this for Charles Evers and the NAACP, that's where he directed his efforts was to get blacks to vote. He said if you get the vote, you get the strength, and he was so right.

00:24:44:00

INTERVIEWER: OK, LET'S JUST CUT RIGHT THERE, THAT'S GOOD.

[cut]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: SPEED. AND MARK.

[sync tone]

INTERVIEWER: OK, NOW, WHEN GOVERNOR, WELL, WHEN, GOVERNOR ELECT JOHNSON WAS RUNNING FOR OFFICE IN 1963, WAS HE SUPPORTED BY THE CITIZENS' COUNCIL, AND IF SO, WHY?

Johnston: Yes, he was supported, Governor Johnson when he ran in 1963 was supported wholeheartedly by the Citizens' Council because his well, in '63, his opponent was–in the second primary—was J.P. Coleman. Now J.P. Coleman was the Governor now who signed the first bill creating the Sovereignty Commission. But over the years, Governor Coleman had been given the brand of being a moderate, a very much of a moderate. In fact he had gotten kind of close to the Kennedy's and I remember that when one of the candidates ran for Governor that summer he said something about the hotline between Washington and Ackerman, and Ackerman was the home of Governor Coleman, and that was a kind of a slug that he was too footsy with the Kennedy's. So, anyway Governor Johnson, at that time of course he was just Paul B. Johnson, but anyway he, he did–he was Lieutenant Governor, excuse me-he did capitalize on the entry of Meredith into Ole Miss because he was on campus. And he one time blocked Meredith and the marshals when Governor Barnett couldn't get there. And so his publicity department dreamed up this cartoon of Paul B.

Johnson with his fist drawn back as if he was going to take a swipe at James Meredith and the marshal who was with him and it was a widely publicized cartoon and it went along with the theme of the campaign which was "Stand Tall with Paul." And the story says he stood up for you, you stand up for him on Election Day.

00:26:46:00

INTERVIEWER: OK, SO THEN–

[wild audio]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: I think we better reload.

INTERVIEWER: OK, STOP THERE.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: Just, just take a second.

Johnston: Now you want to go into–

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: ENTER SOUND ROLL 337.

Johnston: –the inauguration speech now?

INTERVIEWER: YEAH.

[cut]

[slate]

[change camera roll to 338]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: SPEED AND

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: MARK.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: MARK.

[sync tone]

INTERVIEWER: OK, SO, NOW WE'VE ESTABLISHED HOW HE GOT THAT OFFICE. NOW WHAT HAPPENED WITH THE NOW GOVERNOR'S INAUGURATION ADDRESS? WHAT DID HE SAY AND WHAT WAS THE REACTION?

Johnston: When Paul B. Johnston was inaugurated as Governor and he made his inaugural address he shocked a lot of people in Mississippi by his apparent turn about from his campaign tactics. In fact, one of the most quoted things that he said that inaugural address

was, “When we fight, it won’t be a rearguard action for yesterday, but an all-out assault for our share of tomorrow.” And that inaugural speech made the front page of the New York Times and I really believe it is the only inaugural speech by any governor that ever made the front page of the New York Times that is by a Mississippi governor.

INTERVIEWER: DID THINGS BEGIN TO CHANGE THEN IN DAY-TO-DAY LIFE?

Johnston: Then, things changed, they got, a lot of people fell out with Governor Johnson, a lot of them who had supported him, just fell out with him they thought that he had retreated somewhat, but Governor Johnson to me was trying to be practical, he was trying to keep things together and trying to stay in the mainstream without going overboard this way or that way, and I think he is due the credit for doing that because like I say he, he went ahead and led the fight to get the constitution changed which of course at one time was so sacred if you dared mention changing the constitution why then you, you were pointed out like a heretic you know. And so he did keep a very smooth course going and I think that Mississippi is really indebted to him. But he did shock a lot of those people, including the Citizens’ Council leadership, who had supported him for governor and anticipated that he would probably take the same stance as Barnett.

00:28:56:00

INTERVIEWER: WOULD YOU SAY HE WAS A SEGREGATIONIST BEFORE AND, AND THEN A PRACTICAL SEGREGATIONIST, OR–

Johnston: Well, I’m sure that he would accept the label of segregationist because like I said just about everybody was back in those days, but he came around to being practical, because that’s what I like to say that I was, a practical segregationist because he could see what was happening and he didn’t see any point in butting his head against the wall.

INTERVIEWER: OK, LET’S CUT RIGHT THERE.

[cut]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: AND MARK

INTERVIEWER: YOU SEE THAT I’M TRYING TO GET AT BASICALLY–

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: MARK.

[sync]

00:29:26:00

INTERVIEWER: HOW DID PEOPLE FEEL ABOUT ALL THESE STUDENTS, FOR

THE MOST PART, COMING INTO THE STATE IN 64?

Johnston: Mississippi in general they were, of course fearful of the students coming in from Ohio after they'd been through a staging area because they didn't know what to expect, they didn't know whether they were gonna come in here and be violent or they were gonna come in here and not be violent or what they were going to do to incite violence, or what they were going to do to cause any further tension among the races that already existed. For the most part, I think that Mississippians did leave to law enforcement personnel, but their responsibilities did arise when they came in, because what they were trying to do was integrate in groups anything that that time was segregated whether it be a, a restaurant, or a library, or a swimming pool or whatever, and fortunately, I think that the, the violence was held to a minimum. Many of them really just wanted to go through the motions of doing it, and then when police would come along and lead them away, why that was okay, they, they had a lot of them down at the fairgrounds I believe, they created some temporary detention facilities, I'd call it for a lot of those people because they willingly went along, they didn't fight the police, they just went ahead and made their pitch and made their stand, and I think we were really very fortunate that there was not more violence than did occur.

INTERVIEWER: WHAT WAS YOUR REACTION TO THE MURDER OF THOSE THREE CIVIL RIGHTS WORKERS?

Johnston: Oh, that was the worst thing that ever happened. In fact the people who do things like that were the ones who, unwittingly, were giving as we call the liberals a whole lot more operating room and a whole lot more reason to do what they were gonna do, because of the fact that every time you had an act like that why, you had more people who were saying, something's got to be done, something's got to be done. Of course we called that a crime, a crime. A crime could have been committed against white, it could against blacks, or whatever, but in this particular case and of course the way it turned out there was not doubt it was a racially moti-motivated crime.

00:31:43:00

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: COULD I FOLLOW UP WITH SOMETHING HERE? I'M CURIOUS IF IT WAS YOUR SENSE THAT, AT THE TIME, OR THE SENSE OF THE PEOPLE OF MISSISSIPPI AT THE TIME, WHETHER THESE COLLEGE KIDS HAD COME DOWN TO TELL YOU HOW TO RUN YOUR OWN STATE AND IF IT WAS THE SENSE OF--THE PEOPLE ARE SICK THAT. COLLEGE KIDS HAD NO BUSINESS DOING THAT.

Johnston: Mississippians didn't think that anybody had anybody had any business coming into Mississippi. They were branded from within the states as "outside agitators." That was the favorite phrase to lump 'em all together. Whether they were students, whether they were adults, or who they were, they were outside agitators, and that was a, a, a, definition very often used by public leaders in Mississippi.

INTERVIEWER: OK, AND CAN YOU GIVE ME SOME SPECIFIC EXAMPLES OF, OF,

OF THE INFLUENCE THAT THE CITIZENS' COUNCIL HAD AS AN ORGANIZATION IN THE EARLY '60S. THEY MAY NOT HAVE URGED PARTICULARLY VOTE—VOTING FOR THIS OR THAT CANDIDATE BUT THEY HAD TREMENDOUS INFLUENCE IN DAY TO DAY LIFE. CAN YOU THINK OF AN EXAMPLE?

Johnston: The Citizens' Council had tremendous influence in those days, not only because of the money they were able to get from the Sovereignty Commission which I've always, always referred to, but because of the fact that they became involved in the election of an editor at the University of Mississippi, the paper called the Mississippian, and they were influential in getting one person defeated because they had found out that this one person had, had been in Atlanta and and had been in some marches there. However, later it turned out he was trying to cover the situation for a newspaper and was not a participant, but fair game. That was part of the hysteria. If you were there you were part of it. The Citizens' Council also were very influential in legislation when Governor Barnett became Governor in let's see, 1960, there were several bills that were adopted, that were submitted by Governor Barnett that were written in part or put it all together by Citizens' Council. They were bills that were designed at that time to preserve segregation.

00:33:57:00

INTERVIEWER: SPECIFICALLY, HOW DID THOSE BILLS WORK? WHAT WERE THEY ENDORSING?

Johnston: The, the bills were concerning, got to start over. Stop it a minute.

INTERVIEWER: OK, WE'LL STOP.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: STOP.

[cut]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: MARK PLEASE.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: MARK

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: THANK YOU.

INTERVIEWER: OK, SO SPECIFICALLY, WHAT WERE SOME OF THE, THE BILLS THAT GOT–

Johnston: During the first session of the legislature, after Barnett became governor, he submitted several bills which of course were partly or wholly prepared by Citizens' Council people that were designed maybe to preserve segregation, and I think that as I recall one of

the bills was going to tighten the voter qualification law. One of them was going to tighten the laws about against intermarriage of the races, making it a felony. And I think another one had something to do with gathering, or something like that. They were all, you might say doing what later on Governor Paul Johnson said he would not fight a rearguard action for yesterday. And I think those bills were considered at that time
for the, after that time, a rear guard action. But the, the attitude of the legislature was with only two or three exceptions was, anything that smacks of a way to help segregation, pass it.

00:35:16:00

INTERVIEWER: OK, GOOD. LET'S STOP RIGHT THERE, THAT'S GOOD.

[cut]

INTERVIEWER: I, I, I'LL ASK A MORE SPECIFIC QUESTION, I'M JUST TRYING TO GET YOU BACK.

Johnston: OK.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: MARK.

[sync tone]

INTERVIEWER: OK SO IF, JUST DESCRIBE, IF YOU WOULD, THE, THE REACTION OF POOR WHITE MISSISSIPPIANS TO THIS GROWING BLACK AWARENESS OF MISSISSIPPI IN THE EARLY 60S. I MEAN BLACKS ARE DEMONSTRATING, AND, AND TAKING PART IN VOTING REGISTRATION DRIVES FORMING THESE FREEDOM DEMOCRATIC PARTY. WHAT WAS THE REACTION OF PERHAPS THESE POORER ELEMENTS OF THE STATE?

Johnston: What you call the poor white element in the state, if they wanted to be heard or if they wanted to join, they had the avenues of membership in the Citizens' Council or the Americans for Preservation of the White Race or the Ku Klux Klan. The only organization that I can recall that a lot of the people belong to was the Mississippi Farm Bureau and I don't recall the farm bureau ever getting involved in this kind of a, controversy. The Farm Bureau worked more for protection of farmers or crop supports or good markets, and things like that.

00:36:34:00

INTERVIEWER: OK, NOW HOW DID YOU TOUCHED ON THIS BEFORE, BUT SPECIFICALLY, HOW DID THE, PASSING OF THE CIVIL RIGHTS ACT, HOW DID THAT CHANGE, SAY, THE CUSTOMS AND THE TRADITIONS OF, IN MISSISSIPPI IN REGARDS TO RACE?

Johnston: When Congress passed the Civil Rights Acts of 1964 now, I might as well tell you,

the Sovereignty Commission was involved in fighting the passage of that bill. In fact we had money funneled through the Sovereignty Commission, donated by outsiders, in fact, one from New York, who were interested in not seeing that bill passed. Of course our position was at that time that if you have a restaurant you ought to decide who you want to serve. Of course their position was that if you were in the public if you were advertising and that kind of stuff, why you got to accept whoever comes in in response to your ad. And we considered that sort of an invasion of, of states' rights. The Supreme Court had ruled unconstitutional the Agricultural Adjustment Act of President Roosevelt's day because it invaded states' rights. So this was a turn around as far as the Supreme Court was concerned. States' rights? No, they don't exist.

[wild audio]

Johnston: So, Barnett often said you know, that the, the Bill of Rights was a, was good for the country until the Supreme Court started tearing it up.

INTERVIEWER: OK.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: WE'RE ABOUT TO RUN OUT.

INTERVIEWER: OK.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: YEAH.

[cut]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: AND MARK.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: MARK.

[sync tone]

00:38:23:00

INTERVIEWER: OK, HOW WOULD EVENTS HAPPENING OUTSIDE OF MISSISSIPPI DURING THIS PERIOD, LIKE THIS-THE MARCH ON WASHINGTON AND THE, THE RESPONSE THAT IT DREW AFFECT THE PEOPLE OF THE STATE? IN OTHER WORDS, WHAT WAS YOUR REACTION TO THIS HUGE MARCH OF PEOPLE WHO WERE DEMANDING CIVIL RIGHTS AND WHO WERE COMING OUT, AND BY THE THOUSANDS IN WASHINGTON? WHAT DID… HOW DID YOU REACT?

Johnston: During that period of course there were a lot of marches in Alabama you know, and Washington, other places like that, and of course, Mississippians watched developments, a lot of them that wondered if we were gonna have that kind of thing happen in Mississippi too. And of course there was always the fear of what would happen, how it would happen,

but they tried their best to say that's happening there and we hope it doesn't happen here.

00:39:12:0

INTERVIEWER: OK, THAT'S GOOD, AND WHAT ABOUT THE DID YOU REALLY FEEL THAT THAT BLACKS AT THAT TIME ALREADY HAD THE VOTING RIGHTS THAT THEY DESERVED? SAY IN 1963, 64, THAT THERE WAS NO NEED FOR THEM TO PROTEST OR TO JOIN MARCHES OR WHAT, WHAT WAS YOUR POSITION? I'M STILL NOT CLEAR.

Johnston: Well, when you ask my position-and I can't tell you any more about my position than I could about the, the general feeling that existed about that time-but back in those days, Mississippi had a poll tax. It was a $2 per head tax. And you could not vote in a Democratic primary unless you had paid the two dollar poll tax. Well, of course in a lot of counties there were blacks who paid the poll tax and voted but they were just tokens, they were just token. We've had some blacks here in Forest that have been voting ever since I've been here. That goes back to, way back in 1941, see. But they were just a token few, and a lot of times they were refused when they offered to pay the poll tax. Well, that was now that didn't apply to general elections, that was just to the primary because the, the general election, of course, they didn't require the poll tax. But, the general elections really were, were kind of moot anyway because the primaries always determined who was going to be elected to office. So, of course there was a very few, a very very few of the blacks that voted then. Otherwise the Eastlands and the Barnetts and all of them could not have been elected as they were on platforms that were very segregationist.

INTERVIEWER: BUT DID YOU THINK THE, THAT THE BLACK PEOPLE IN '63, '64, AT THAT PERIOD, DID YOU THINK THEY HAD FULL VOTING RIGHTS? I MEAN, DID YOU THINK THERE WAS NO ARGCENT THERE? OR DID YOU THINK THERE WAS SOME CHANGE?

Johnston: Governor Barnett expressed the thinking of most Mississippians when he said that voting itself wasn't a right, voting was a privilege. Consequently, a person ought to be able to earn the right to vote by being literate or by being able to at least do some things that would be, say, against the person who had to grow up and couldn't even write his name. He considered it a privilege of citizenship and not just a right because he was a citizen.

INTERVIEWER: OK, THAT'S IT. I THINK WE'VE, WE GOT IT.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: Very good.

INTERVIEWER: OK.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: Excellent.

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:41:51:00