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CHARLES EVERS ORAL HISTORY, INTERVIEW I

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Signed by Charles Evers on June 20, 1978

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ACCESSION NUMBER 79-106

INTERVIEW I

DATE: April 3, 1974

INTERVIEWEE: CHARLES EVERS

INTERVIEWER: JOE B. FRANTZ

PLACE: Mayor Evers' office in Fayette, Mississippi

Tape I of I

F: Mr. Mayor, did you have any contact at all with Johnson before he became president?

E: No. All I knew about him before he was president was his record for voting and particularly his stand on the racial issue. It was thought that he was very conservative, and we just were afraid of him. I think that's the reason why that during the time of the campaign when he was running for nomination and finally when Kennedy accepted him as vice president, we all were very reluctant and very fearful that he was going to be one of the worst racists that we ever had up there.

F: Right.

E: I think rightfully so, because he had never done anything in particular to make us think any way different.

F: In that period when he was vice president, you know, he was chairman of the Equal [Employment] Opportunity Commission there to in a sense oversee civil rights for President Kennedy, did you have any relationship with that at that time?

E: Yes. I think that's when we began to realize that President Johnson wasn't really a bad guy. Because he wasn't, as we said in those times, as evasive and making speeches of moment as the so-called super-liberals had been. He sort of called a spade a spade, and we sort of knew where he stood. When he kept emphasizing education and kept emphasizing voting, then that's the same, I guess, that many of us had been fighting for. And we began to realize that.

So he and I had any number of meetings, because I was very active at that time in the civil rights movement. Every time we met with him, he just sort of impressed me a little more and more.

F: Did he contact you first, or did you contact him, or do you have any memory of how you first met him?

E: How we first met him I happen to remember very well. When I first met the President--well, he wasn't president then, he was vice president--we had a so-called leadership meeting in Washington. This meeting was [when] they had called the so-called blacks in the country together to work on this civil rights thing--what we'd put out [to be] input into the civil rights bill, et cetera. I remember very, very clearly, all of us sitting around there from North Carolina, South Carolina, all over the place, talking about what we believed, what we could do, et cetera. The President at that time was sitting over in the corner.

F: You're talking about Johnson?

E: Yes. President Johnson was sitting over in the corner--he and Louis Martin. You know Louis Martin?

F: Yes.

E: He and Louis Martin, just sitting there, looking at us as though we were from somewhere from outer space. I remember very clearly he leaned over to Louis and evidently he must have said something like this; "These fellows must have the answers." And immediately Louis stopped and said, "Wait a minute. Wait a minute. Ya'll are talking about all this civil rights, and you're talking about what you want and what you demand." He said, "You've got to remember one thing. You're in Washington, D.C. And all the folks in Washington, D.C. understand is how many votes can you get." He said, "Now, there ain't no point in ya'll spending your time to tell the Vice President what your demands are or what you're going to have." He said, "What the Vice President wants to know, like the President, is how many votes can you produce at election time?"

I got so damned mad, I could have just run [out of there]. And President Johnson just bowed his head like he was saying "amen" to what he was saying. I looked out at him and thought, "You dirty scoundrel, you. You ain't no different than the rest of them." Then as I sat there and watched the man and listened to Louis [who] just kept pounding away at "What's important in this country is votes," and "What's important in this country is money," and "You ain't winning' you ain't got none of that, so let's go back home and get busy." He said, "You're up here hollering and screaming, but you haven't done your homework." I remember very clearly.

F: At that stage, you didn't have any votes, did you?

E: Didn't have any votes. So I raised my hand and I kept waving my hands, kept waving my hand and finally the Vice President, at that time, points and said, "Look, that gentleman over there, see what he wants." And finally Louis recognized me.

F: Did you know Louis?

E: Oh, I know Louis very well. And he said, "Okay, Charlie, what have you got to say?" And I said, "This is all I got. Now you telling us to go back home and get some votes. We don't even have a damned right to vote in this. We got to count the number of bubbles in a jar and tell how many hogs in the paths and all that kind of mess to even get the right to register. Now what we need to do--how you going to tell us to go back and do something we can't do?"

By that time the Vice President was looking real funny, you know. I said, "Mr. Vice President, you got elected because whites were voting for you, not because of what black folks did." I told him colored, "what the colored folks did." "Because we ain't had no right to vote. Maybe they vote in Texas." He went on to tell about it, said: "In Texas, you know, they've been voting all the time." I said, "Well, they don't vote in this"--we had one big one. But he never seemed to get angry. I remember him saying, "Well, look, maybe what we need to do, Louis, is to make sure that they have the right to vote." And he said, "If we get you the right to vote, do you think you can do anything then?" I was still on the floor and I said, "Well, look, do you think we could have somebody to protect us if we go in to vote? Do you realize my brother was shot because he tried to vote?" Well, now, no, no, that was before then. No. That was Gus Court. "Gus Court was shot because he tried to vote." I was talking about Reverend Lee. These people had been killed way before Medgar [Evers]. And finally he said, "We're talking about something with teeth, something with protection." We [inaudible], very well and then all of the rest of them joined in then.

F: Did he say it so that you felt like you might get something or was it just window dressing?

E: Well, I didn't know. I figured he was just trying to get rid of us, frankly. Because we'd been promised forty acres and a mule all the time.

F: Same things people were supposed to say.

E: And we never got the mule, let alone the forty acres. So I just didn't feel like [he meant it]; he was just another man sent to pacify us.

But after that, we began to see some changes, and then after President Kennedy was killed, well, naturally he took and stepped in, and he got that voters' rights bill. And I'm mayor, I've said many times, because of Lyndon Johnson walking the voter rights bill through, because of his consistency in getting the rights for black folks and white folks and poor folks to have an equal chance, if they had the dollar, had the ability or the help to go down and register to vote or to go and buy a home. So I think my whole thing with the man, and he came from what we thought a rabid racist to

become, as far as I'm concerned, one of the greatest presidents this country's ever had domestically. Now many people would take me on for that, but I think I have a right to say what I believe in. And I still say, when history is written, that Lyndon Johnson will be one of the greatest presidents this country's ever had.

F: Now, you had a reputation as a fairly tough-minded person who says what he's got on his mind, and Johnson was no shrinking violet. Could you pretty well lay it on the line with him, and he lay it on you? In other words, could you two jaw back and forth at each other? I mean both of you can talk pretty plain talk at times, too.

E: Yes. I think so. I think the one thing that he and I had in common was that we were both just country boys. We were both raised on the farm, and this kind of thing. Well, we were southerners; [there's] something about us southerners. We live differently from--

F: You knew what sweat was.

E: And we know what work is. And, in most cases, you can trust us whether you agree with us or not. If you say something, you can put your foot on it.

And the President at that time, after he [Johnson] became president, we became a little more close, because I was there quite often. We had a run-in that I'll never forget just before the President was going through these whether he was going to run or wasn't going to run and this kind of thing. I remember that I personally sent him a telegram once. Then I saw him once, and I said, Mr. President," while we were together, "please don't step down. You run." I remember him saying, "Well, I don't know, Charles. It's just getting pretty rough." And he said his health. He said, "Well, I don't feel too good. Some of the younger people can probably do a better job." And I said, "Well, look at who you're going to [get]? All those I have less faith in." Well, it didn't have any bearing, you can see that. Anyway, he had said many times he didn't know whether he was going to re-run or not. But I didn't know he was going to resign, didn't know he wasn't going to run anymore. I thought for sure he was going to stay on and run again.

But he was the kind of man you could talk to. He listened. He would do what he wanted to do about a thing and he would tell you where he stood on it. But I think the most important thing was he realized just before it was too late and after he became president, that we're just people. I think he realized the wrong that America had done to poor folks and black folks, and he wanted to help to do it [change things].

He and Bobby Kennedy were both my dear friends. And I remember very clearly Bobby and I had one stiff argument; I don't know if it was a stiff argument, but we had some differences. Because Bobby knew how I felt about Bobby, and he knew how I felt about President Johnson.

When Bobby was threatening to run--I got to tell you right here and now--he called me up and we talked and talked. And finally he said, "Come," and I went up to see him. He said he was thinking about running for president. I said, "Against President Johnson?" He said, "Yes." I said, "Bobby, come on now. Don't do that." I said, "In the first place, you run against President Johnson, you're running for the same votes as the President is running for. You're going to split the whole civil rights group and those who believe in equal rights right down the middle. Because you're going to make us take a choice, choose between the two of you." I said, "That puts us in a hell of a position."

But Bobby's feeling was that he can't do this war job. You know, "He won't end the war, and he's a hawk." And I said, "Well, that's beside the point. Isn't America a hawk? Basically, isn't America a warmonger? Black, white, blue--we're known to fight. That's how we got where we are." So I said, "I just can't agree with you."

He said, "If I run, would you support me?" And I looked him right in the face, and I said, "Bobby, if it was anybody else, I would. But I can't go against Lyndon Johnson, because he's done too much for us." I said, "Now I know how the feeling is between you and him, but that ain't none of my business. But the two of you are my friends. And you been a friend of black folks and poor folks. And the two of you are not going to be butting heads. It just don't make no kind of sense."

He couldn't understand my feelings, I don't guess, and so he didn't push me too hard. Then finally, when the President decided he wouldn't run then, well, that sort of relieved so many folks. It wasn't just Charles though, there were thousands upon thousands who had a feeling for Bobby Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson.

F: They'd have hated to have to make that choice.

E: And here we are, and it's a heck of a choice to make. So, of course, if it had happened, neither one of them would have gotten elected.

F: Right.

E: Because it would have split their forces, and some other person, undesirable, would have got elected. That's what would have happened. But, thank God, it didn't happen, and President Johnson was big enough to see that and step down.

F: I always had the feeling--this is getting way ahead of the story--that he would run in 1968 if Nixon got nominated, because he just would have liked to take him on. But he fooled me on that and evidently fooled you, too, on it.

- E: Right. I just didn't think he would step down. I thought he was too tough to step down. I have a weakness for tough men. I didn't think that President Johnson would ever step down.
- F: I've seen some of his correspondence, and in it I've seen at least one letter where he writes to you as "Dear Charles." There were a number of leaders, both black and white, that he never got on a first name basis with. Did you get the feeling that you all sort of crossed that little threshold between a formal and necessary relationship into one in which you were friends?
- E: Well, I thought so, but I always respected him as president. But I felt that way. One thing I can say is that I never called that I didn't get an appointment to see him. I never was in Washington that I couldn't just drop in. You might not believe this, but I just dropped in. I'd be in Washington, I'd just go by the White House and see the President.
- F: He'd find time?
- E: In most cases. Now, [Lee] White used to try to block me a lot. White was the guy who he had out there. He used to try to block me quite a few times. But I would always sneak a note in of some kind to let him know I was out there. And I could always go through the Rose Garden and sometimes get in there.
- F: And I guess once you got in, he acted like he was just waiting for you.
- E: Then the next thing, Mrs. Johnson is a lovely woman, and we all love her even today. Because she was a wonderful hostess. She was just a wonderful first lady.
- F: Did Johnson ever talk to you about some of these programs he had in mind: the three major bills on voting and on housing and so on, and the community action programs?
- E: Yes. And I don't think it was just talking to me alone. He talked to many of us about it. And his whole thing was making America strong, bringing the left-outs in. The OEO program that he brought into being which meant so much to those who never had a chance before, the voter rights bill which gave all of us the right to participate in our own government, and housing--
- F: Did he show an interest in Mississippi's upsurge?
- E: Oh, yes. When the voter rights bill passed, he and I had a little hassle, because, I was just demanding that he send, in all eighty-two counties, federal registrars. And he said, "No, Charles, that's not the way to do it now. I'm going to send in enough to show that we will come if they don't give you the kind of support that you want."

F: Show you mean business.

E: Show you mean business. And he and I hassled that a little bit, but he was interested. He had men, black and white, that he felt would be concerned about the welfare about blacks and poor whites.

I have a thing about "just blacks." You see, there are many poor whites in this country who need help. And President Johnson had a thing about education. He wanted to see us in there with education. He just knew that any people who are ignorant and uneducated is a threat, and a threat is not a helpful threat. It's a disaster. And I think that the man felt like there's just three things that he could do: give us a decent house to live in, a decent education, and a full opportunity to participate in our political system in this country. And he did that. And as far as I'm concerned, he made more effort to do that than anybody else that I know right now.

F: Did it cause you a problem . . . You have been a spearhead in a Mississippi revolution, not to mention the whole national scene, of turning things around. It's undone a lot of people's ideas over the years. Now then, Mississippi dropped Johnson like he was a hot potato. Was that a kind of double burden for you: one, trying to get on with your program, and two, having to carry Johnson on your back?

E: Well, it wasn't really carrying him on my back, I guess. But it was only a few of us who believed in him, and it just so happened as how we didn't have many votes. But if you noticed that when Humphrey ran after President Johnson stepped down and didn't run again, that Humphrey came in second in Mississippi. He came in with almost two hundred thousand votes. So Humphrey and Johnson were practically on the same level as far as their social and their belief about the rights of human beings. So I think it was just a little too soon when President Johnson first ran. We didn't have enough votes, particularly black votes. There were many [whites], but there were few open-minded whites. So that's what made it look so bad in Mississippi. But no Democratic president--so he didn't have to feel bad about it--carried Mississippi for many years.

F: Did the Mississippi hierarchy--I'm thinking particularly of Senator [James] Eastland--give you any trouble during this period, or did they pretty well leave you to do your thing while they went on with what they'd been doing all these years?

E: Well, frankly, they've never directly that I know of--and I'll be honest with you about that, I've had a lot of trouble, but I don't know where it came from. So I can't say yes or no. I just don't know. I don't know of any.

F: You went ahead sort of independently of the party structure and just made your way?

E: Well, I guess you'd say that. And I also went sort of independent, I guess, of the NAACP and all the rest of them that I'm supposed to be a part of. Because I have somehow the claim that I'm bullheaded and I'm stubborn and not much of an organization man; I'm more or less an individual. I guess they're right. But my whole thing is that it doesn't take a whole lot for us to get the job done. I think the President felt the same way.

F: Did you get the feeling that the President liked to work with you because you were field director for the NAACP or he liked to work with you because you were Charles Evers and he'd gotten to know you?

E: I guess it could have been a combination. I think the main thing is, he knew that not only Charles Evers, but there were many of them that would go out and he could depend on to get a job done. I think when we said we wanted people to register to vote, we went and worked at it, and he could see that.

F: Did he ever tell you how to go about it?

E: No, he never did.

F: He figured you knew the situation?

E: I don't know that, now. I'm just saying he never told me that I ought to go out and do very well. All he would say was, "You've got to have some registered voters. You've got to have your people educated. You've got to have decent houses. And you've got to be prepared to be a part of the system for which we're trying to fight." And I remember one thing he said; he said that you can never change things until you become the system. And I've said that many times in a lot of my little speeches. That's one thing he'd always say, "If you want to change the system, get in it and make what you want to make out of it."

F: Did he respond when you contacted him? I know you urged him to have an investigation following the murder of Lewis Allen and then, also, with regard to the bombings. Did he respond to that?

E: Oh yes, right away. It wasn't just my request. I think it was the fact that the crime had been committed. But I did request it. But he did right away. I mean the FBI and the Justice Department were all here right away.

F: Did you feel he put the power of the presidency behind integrating schools here?

E: That's a hard question to answer. I just don't know. I think he did . . . what he did, he did because he thought it was right.

For instance, the night he danced with the black woman on his inauguration night. How many presidents have done that? I'm not even thinking about the President. I'm thinking about, "This is my friend's wife, and I'm going to dance with her." I mean, he was that kind of man. He did what he thought was right regardless of what it cost him.

F: He'd have danced with her if she'd been plaid?

E: Right. That was his friend's wife, and he danced with her.

F: Right. Did you get the feeling that part of this massive federal aid to education program was to get this school system integrated in the United States?

E: I don't know.

F: Or was there an overlap there in your mind?

E: No, here's what I really felt. I felt, and I still feel, that President Johnson felt, and knew, that two separate schools would never be the same and that there's no way you can have a separate white school and a separate black school equal in any sense.

F: No equality.

E: So he just felt like we needed a school. And he knew that the South--being a southerner--was not able to afford separate schools. So he knew that they were not able to finance schools. So he felt like the federal government owed--I feel like he felt this, I can't speak for the man--and that the government had the money, and they should help provide good education for all of us, and good opportunities.
(Interruption)

F: Now just for the future, let's pronounce Fayette right, since every town has a right to pronounce itself the way it wants to.

E: F-A-Y-E-T-T-E.

F: Fa-yette. And they do make it a "yette" in there. Fayette. Okay. Well, since you've been around, you know that these things change. Did Johnson ever talk to you about how Fayette was doing?

E: No, you see, he wasn't president when I became mayor. He'd just gone out. But we used to correspond quite a bit, and I used to always tell him, "Mr. President, I'm the mayor because of your pushing the voter rights bill through and because of your concern about getting equal opportunity, not only for blacks, but for those who were

left out of the political system. And whatever I am politically, I owe it to you." He just sort of laughed.

F: He liked that, huh?

E: Sort of laughed and said, "No, you did your own thing." He said, "You were able to take care of yourself. We're just glad we helped to make it possible." I mean, this was the kind [of man he was]. He was a very modest man, never always wanting to take the praise. Or I didn't ever get that from him. He felt that what he'd done was what he was supposed to have done.

F: Did he ever talk to you about the other black leaders?

E: No, no, we never [discussed it]. I know he had a few favorites. For instance, Roy Wilkins and Whitney Young and A. Philip Randolph, they were his top.

And remember now, I wasn't near the kind that had the relationship with the President that they had. I just happened to be an acquaintance of his, and that was about all. We weren't the buddy-buddy type; we were friends. I think it was because of the things we were trying to do here, things that Medgar fought and died for. He knew where we stood, and he knew we said what we meant and we meant what we said.

F: Did you have the feeling that he had an understanding of the Mississippi situation, and what the hazards were, and what the possibilities were?

E: I did, because, see, first of all, he'd come from just across the line up in Texas, knowing the--

F: Not that much better.

E: There was all about the same type of [thing]--as you say, come off the same stalk--that he knew the attitudes and he knew the feelings. I think that's the reason he was so effective in getting these programs through, because he knew how to handle the southern delegation, and particularly the southern congressmen and southern senators. And he used it to his own advantage and to the advantage of us that needed it.

F: Did you have the feeling that he did do a fairly good job on working on some of your southern congress people? I know he missed on [William H.] Colmer. He missed on some of the others.

E: But very definitely. Because, had he not had some effect, the civil rights bill never would have passed, as it did. The voting rights bill never would have passed, as it did.

Many of the social programs that he got through never would have passed, had he not been able to communicate, to deal with the southern congressmen and senators.

F: Did he ever talk to you about his hopes for getting an open housing bill through?

E: No. I was there when he signed the voter rights bill. I still have the pen.

F: I know. Tell me about that ceremony. He invited you up, didn't he?

E: Yes, yes. He invited me. You know, a funny thing, when I got the call from the White House, I was field secretary for the NAACP at that time. Somebody said, "There's a call from the White House for Mr. Evers." "The White House! Who'd be calling me from the White House?"

F: Called you here in Fayette?

E: In Jackson. I was in Jackson then. Surprisingly enough, when I answered . . .

F: Well, even in Jackson, that's not common.

E: I said, "Hello?" He said, "Charles," I said, "Yes?" He said, "This is President Johnson." I said, "Y-yes, Mr. President. What's wrong?" He said, "I want you to be a witness, because the struggle has been all about the South." He said, "I want you to be a witness of the signing of the voter rights bill into law. I want you here." So I said, "Thank you, sir. I'll be there." He didn't tell me when or nothing. It was up to me to find out, and I found out. I took off, and I was right there on time. He gave me the pen. I have one of the pens.

F: Did he make a big ceremony out of it?

E: No, it really wasn't. It was very simple. We all went into--I don't know if it was the Oval Room; it was one of those rooms. He was sitting at a big desk of his. I guess it must have been twenty-five or thirty of us.

F: The congressional leaders and the black leaders, primarily?

E: Right, I guess you'd say that, and some of the people we knew. We just stood there. And as soon as he'd run one pen dry, he would hand it to whoever was near him. As usual, I'm always too far back to get one. When he was just about to finish, I saw he was getting very close and I said to my friend who by that time was [Lee] White, who happened to be his assistant, "How am I going to get me one of them pens?" He said, "Oh, I'll get you one." And when he got through, he saved one and gave it to me.

F: Did he talk to you about coming to your mayoralty swearing-in?

E: Well, we did have a little discussion, but it never materialized. I invited him, and it never did materialize. He was sick then; I believe he'd had one of those light heart attacks before. I just didn't insist on him coming, but he sent me a telegram. I got a telegram from him. And then I got a letter later on expressing he was pleased, and how proud he was, and he knew I'd make a good mayor because I'd done good things right up from the voter rights bill; and now that I had it, I'd know how to use it, and that type of thing.

F: Did you ever talk with him about putting in any installations down here in Mississippi?

E: Oh, yes, I sure did. The main thing I told him, I said, "Look, Mr. President, if you'll just put one record building. One record building would employ all the unemployed"--at that time I was living in Jackson and Decatur--"in my whole little town. Just put one record building." He just laughed and said, "Well, I'm sure it would, but how do we get the Congress and the rest of the folks to agree to put one in Charles Evers' town?" And this kind of thing. He said he thought it was a good idea. And I told him, "Look, then, what about a V.A. hospital?" He said, "We've got one in Jackson." I said, "But what if I want one someplace else?" I was working in Natchez at the time, too, and I asked him about one in this area. He said, "Well, that's something your congressmen will have to do. You have to ask for and get them to." I said, "You know who my congressmen are." And we sort of laughed it off, but that's about as far as we got on that.

F: Did you talk about the Job Corps?

E: We talked about the Job Corps. But I was raising sand with Sargent Shriver about not getting them into Mississippi. Shriver told me, "Charles, it's not me. Your governor won't accept it. The state won't accept it." So then I said, "Well, what if the President would order?" And he said that the President didn't have that authority just to order a state. It's a volunteer thing. We don't want to be anywhere that they're not wanted." My answer to that was: "It's not where they're not wanted, it's where they're needed. And they're needed in Mississippi." But we never did get them.

F: It was widely accepted that, certainly, southern draft boards leaned a little harder on blacks than they did on whites. Did you ever get into that with the President?

E: The only thing I did, I sent him some fiery telegrams a couple of times about the fact that there were ninety draft boards in Mississippi and there wasn't a single black on the board. I kept firing them off to him and the Justice Department. Finally, we got one and then later on, I guess now we must have half a dozen or so. But it was a slow thing. And we know, back in those days when I was of draft age, that all of the smart

blacks or smart colored or smart dark, whatever it may have been then, the one way to get rid of them was to put them in the Army, other than hanging them or shooting them. So they were always stowed away in the Army. And those who were in with the great white fathers who controlled the planet stayed out.

F: But if they get up, they know where they're going.

E: If they're smart, they're going to the Army.

F: Right. Did you see any effect of this?

E: Well, eventually we got a couple. So I guess there must have been some effect--not only from me, but I think other people were hollering, too.

F: Did you work fairly closely with Ramsey Clark?

E: Oh yes. Yes. Very close. Ramsey and I were very good friends.

F: What did you think of him?

E: I thought Ramsey was--I still think he's a wonderful man. I think Ramsey's about like Charles Evers. I mean, he's about ten years ahead of the time and the country, but he's still a great man. I thought it was a great thing for President Johnson to appoint him. I was a little skeptical, like most of the blacks. "There's another Texan going in there," you know. But Ramsey's dad had proven that we didn't have too much to worry about. And Ramsey was even tougher than his dad was.

F: Ramsey looked like one of those thin reeds up there. But you never could break him.

E: Right.

F: Did you get in on that Dixie tour that Lady Bird made through here in 1964?

E: No, I was invited to go, but I just didn't have time. At that time I was so busy marching and picketing and things were in such a turmoil until I just didn't have time to go.

F: Did it have a really strong effect with the black community here?

E: There's no question about that. You see, we always knew since he became president and when he was vice president--it wasn't but a little while before he was president--that he cared about us. It's a funny thing about black folks. Any white person who showed us a little concern, and I say it with no reservations, just sweep

black people off their feet. And there's a very simple answer to that: because all our lives, we'd never seen anyone give a damn; they'd always been damning us, or kicking us, or mistreating us, or finding fault. And when one shows that he or she is concerned about us, just a little bit, it's so much different than what we've been used to until we just--most of the time, blacks go overboard for them. So Lady Bird and President Johnson were that type of Texans, who showed quite a bit of concern about us and about poor folks. I'm going to invite her here, by the way. Because I think we've got to keep him alive, like I've tried to keep Medgar alive. Right now, if she'd come, you wouldn't be able to get in no church with her, no building, because they'd fill it up. Only because they feel like she cares.

F: She'd love to come.

E: I'm going to invite her. She was down in Natchez a couple of years ago.

F: When she came on that spring tour or something?

E: Yes. That pilgrimage. But I'm going to invite her to come to Fayette and just spend a day with us, nothing special, just come. So we can show her how much we care and what Lyndon Johnson meant to those of us who were left out before he came along.

F: How tangibly did he leave his mark on Mississippi? I mean, what have you got here in the way of community action programs that you wouldn't have had otherwise, in the way of buildings--?

E: I'll tell you very quickly. Number one, had it not been for Lyndon Johnson, as far as I know, out of eighty-two counties, we now have eighty-two federal programs of some sort for which he was responsible. We have Head Starts practically in every county for our young kids. When I came along, not only did we have no Head Starts, we didn't have any pre-school, or day care centers, or nothing.

F: Or after school.

E: We didn't hardly have a school program. Now we have those in most of the counties. OEO is still alive; whether they try to kill it or not, it's still alive. We are the third highest number of black elected officials in the country. Before Lyndon Johnson and Medgar made it possible, we didn't have a single black elected official in this state. We had less than twenty eight thousand blacks registered in the whole state. Now we have over a quarter of a million blacks registered in this state. As I said before, we have the third highest number of black elected officials than any other state in the country except New York and Michigan.

F: Even the most rigid white politician has to pay some attention to that number of votes.

E: You can say that again.

Then Lyndon Johnson, I think, his efforts to make it possible to get it in struck all of the nigger-nigger stuff from those congressmen and senators who'd been running before because the niggers couldn't vote. The mere fact he helped us to get registered cut all that nigger-nigger stuff. And the fact that he pushed and walked through the civil rights bill--now every hotel and every motel and every restaurant is open to folks--not black folks, but to everybody. So these are the kinds of things that he's done for us, and these are the kinds of things that make us know that he cared. I don't care what they say about him. As far as I'm concerned, I think he's the greatest president we ever had for folks.

F: Was there a reaction--they both happened out of state, but two things I think of in particular. One was that "We shall overcome" speech that he made up there in the East. Was that noticed down here?

E: Up at Howard University?

F: Yes.

E: Oh, was it noticed! Yes, indeed. The very fact that he locked arms and sort of sang and rocked with us, that was the most touching thing, I think. Because, not only had we never had a president, we never had a governor do that. At that time, I don't know if we'd ever had a mayor to even do that. We had the President of the United States. Not only did he give a "We shall overcome" speech, which meant "we" shall, not black folks, but all of us, and then to stand before the nation and lock arms with black folks, who somehow we had never had a chance to even see, let alone touch and saying, "We shall overcome together." That was the most touching thing I've ever . . .

F: And the other one was that speech he made I think down in New Orleans on he was tired of hearing "nigger, nigger" all his life.

E: Right.

F: Did that get up in this area?

E: That didn't make as much publicity. We heard about it, that "We shall overcome."

F: They understood what he was talking about when he said that he'd listened to white politicians say that for years?

E: And that's the reason why that I keep maintaining that we blacks can't become the same kind of mean, selfish animals that whites have been. I can't holler "whitey,

whitey, whitey" now, because I've been fighting "nigger, nigger, nigger" all my life. And Lyndon Johnson and Kennedy and a few more of them made it possible to end that. That's why I always try to tell blacks, "You've got to remember that our little accomplishment wasn't done by blacks alone. There were a few white folks who cared. Men like Lyndon Johnson, there's some others: the Kennedys, [Senator Charles] Percy of Illinois, [Nelson] Rockefeller of New York. There's always been some who cared."

F: You've been out to Austin to make a speech. Did you see any Johnson people when you were out there?

E: Oh, yes. I've been to Austin a couple of times, and every time I go in a way, I guess it sort of bothers me a little bit too much to go out there. Because it's sort of like the Bible said, "The man who had done the most for them are damned by his own people." When I go to Austin and I start praising Johnson as a good president, I've had quite a few people who give me the dirty look or "Oh, him." And I can understand it, because, being black fifty-one years, I know what it's like not to be appreciated. But it just sort of hurts you to see a man who gave so much . . .

F: Did he ever mention in your presence the direction part of the black movement was taking, which was away from a whole American society and into a sort of separatist society?

E: No. We never discussed that.

F: Did he ever show, one way or another, that he sort of understood why some blacks got so militant?

E: No. I never discussed that with him either. Like I said, we never were that intimate to discuss those kinds of things. We'd talk about different things, but usually it was in groups. Occasionally, once or twice, I remember one time when they got on him about picking the dog up by the ears. I was teasing him about that once. I said, "Mr. President, you can't handle a little puppy like that! You can't pick them up by the ears." And he said, "Now Charles, don't you start that! I've had enough hell out of that! I don't want to hear that from nobody, especially from my friends." He sort of laughed that off. Things like that we said. But as far as getting into things, we never had a chance to.

F: Did you have much dealing with Lady Bird?

E: No, I haven't. Through him, I've met her, I think maybe twice I met Mrs. Johnson. Anyway, I'm a great admirer of hers. I've written her a number of times. I think I've talked to her once or twice on the phone.

F: Whenever the White House needed some sort of Mississippi connection, did they tend to hit you or Aaron Henry?

E: There were just the two of us. They'd always contact one of us or both of us. Particularly when President Johnson was out here.

F: As far as the movement was concerned--the general black movement in Mississippi--there wasn't any sort of a real rivalry there? I mean, you both were primarily dedicated to getting on with it.

E: Oh, yes. There was no rivalry. We had a few people that came from SNCC, and a few came in from CORE.

F: Was it Bob Moses?

E: Now, Bob was with us. And CORE. And we had SCLC come in. Sometimes we had a little. Wasn't no big friction, because we just realized that we were all fighting for the same thing. And we were glad to have them.

F: You didn't get into any kind of jurisdictional disputes?

E: No. No. Mississippi was too bad for that! (Laughter) Nobody wanted to . . .

F: You couldn't afford it? (Laughter)

E: We couldn't afford that.

F: Right. Do you think of anything else you want to talk about?

E: No, the only thing I want to say [is that] I just hope that, in whatever you're writing about the President, you'll show some of the good side of him and not all of the things that you didn't like, and that I want the record to show that we cared about him, and that we appreciated what he did for us and appreciate the fact that he was man enough to perceive what racism and what hatred had done, and he tried to make a change, tried to make it better for us. And I'm sure that, because of his efforts, that we now have millions of blacks registered that we wouldn't have had before and we have millions participating in the mainstream. We have a man in Mississippi who has been appointed by the governor as minority representative. Who would have ever thought this? Only because of this . . .

F: If Ross Barnett had ever suggested that, they'd have hustled him off. And blacks would have helped, I think!

E: Right. So this is where we are. And it's been because of Lyndon Johnson, what he meant to this country, and what he did for all of us, that made it possible for us to have the kind of input and the kind of little freedom we do have this day.

F: Let me ask you one thing. Once upon a time ten years ago, and not much further back than that, for the top flight white politicians in Mississippi to have worked with you would have been a political sin that was almost-

E: Suicide.

F: Can you now work with people like [James] Eastland and [John] Stennis and your governor, and so on? I mean, have they faced up to the change?

E: I don't know that we can say they have faced fully, but there's a relationship between Senator Stennis . . .

F: You've got a working relationship?

E: Right. And there's one between Senator Eastland. It's not like it used to be. Right now, I can pick up the phone, if I need to, and call either one of them, and discuss ...

F: You now have a representative.

E: I can call up either one of them. They may not give me what I want, but they'll talk about it where before they wouldn't even answer the phone. See, you're talking about over a quarter of a million votes; and, as the President said way back in the early sixties, that's what they hear. That's what they listen to. Not civil rights. Not social rights. But political and economic: what can you do to them, how can you hurt them, economically or politically. That's what they listen to. Not [just] Eastland or Stennis. Any politician. Because their votes are what put him there, and they can take him away. And I haven't heard either one of them say anything real racist in a long, long time.

F: That's about it.

E: Yes.

[End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview I]