

Civil Rights History Project
Interview completed by the Southern Oral History Program
under contract to the
Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of African American History & Culture
and the Library of Congress, 2011

Interviewee: Mr. Simeon Booker and Mr. Moses J. Newson
Interview Date: July 13, 2011
Location: Recording Studio, ground floor, Jefferson Building, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
Interviewer: Joseph Mosnier, Ph.D.
Videographer: John Bishop
Length: 1:32:24 minutes

John Bishop: Okay, we're rolling.

Joe Mosnier: Today is Wednesday, July 13, 2011. My name is Joe Mosnier of the Southern Oral History Program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. I am in Washington, D.C., in the Jefferson Building of the Library of Congress with videographer John Bishop. And we are here to complete an oral history interview for the Civil Rights History Project, which is a joint undertaking of the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture.

And we're especially pleased and honored today to have with us, um, both Mr. Simeon Booker on the right on the screen and Mr. Moses Newson, um, two gentlemen with long histories of engagement with, um, the Civil Rights Era and beyond and before, as, um, as journalists. So, Mr. Newson and Mr. Booker, thank you very much for troubling to make the trip here today and sitting down. Thank you.

Simeon Booker: All right.

Moses Newson: Good to be here.

JM: I thought I might start, um, Mr. Booker, with just having you tell us a little bit about your entry into your professional journalistic work when you joined in 1942, you joined the, um, *Afro-American* as a reporter at eighteen dollars a week.

SB: Well, um, I'm just trying to think back that far. I was, uh, quite close to the *Afro* because the publisher, Carl Murphy, and my uncle, J.H.N. Waring Jr., the principal of Downingtown Industrial [and Agricultural] School in Pennsylvania, were classmates at Harvard. And so, uh, I always had a, uh, yearning for journalism and for – because of Carl Murphy and I yearned to go to Harvard because of their joint, uh, studies there.

JM: Indeed, you'd go – you would go in the early '50s to Harvard as a Nieman Fellow.

SB: I did, eventually, but, uh, I started off, uh, working as a reporter on the, uh, uh –

JM: The [Cleveland] *Call and Post*.

SB: Well, the *Call and Post*, but I went from the *Afro* to the *Call and Post*, and then I applied for the Harvard Nieman and won a Nieman while I was at the *Call and Post*. And when I finished, I then made up my mind I wanted not to go back to the *Call and Post*, but to go to the *Washington Post*, which I thought would be an advancement.

But when I talked to the publisher, he, uh, said that, uh, “Come and I'll give you a job when [3:14].” I worked in the government as a clerk for a few months until an opening came. But then, when an opening came, I found that being at the *Post*, I was way so far down the ladder that all my background experience at Harvard was of no use. I was covering like a cub reporter.

So, then I decided to leave and go with John H. Johnson, who was opening up a small pocket magazine called *JET*. And I went to Chicago. [Clears throat] And after a few years

there, he started to open a Washington Bureau, and he named me in charge of finding the candidate. So, I chose myself and came to Washington. [Laughter]

JM: I think that was an excellent hire.

SB: Yeah, that's right.

JM: Let me pick that story back up in just a minute, but I want to, I want to turn to Mr. Newson and ask a little bit about kind of your entry into your professional journalistic work. I know – I know that, um, as a young man, you entered the U.S. Navy and went on from there.

MN: Yes, and after I came out of the Navy, I, uh, stuck around awhile and did some work with my father. And, uh, I had always been interested in a lot of the newspapers that we got from different places, uh, the *Pittsburgh Courier*, the *Chicago Defender*, and some of those. Uh, they were telling quite a different story than what we got, uh, in the state paper. At that time, down in Florida, most everybody was taking the [5:00] *Times-Union* out of Jacksonville. And, uh, I saw a lot of things, a lot of stories that interested me, and, uh, being someone who's sort of interested in helping people and, uh, maybe trying to help change the situation we were living under at that time, uh, I chose that as a good field to go into.

And, uh, I started out at, uh, Storer College, uh, in West Virginia for a while. And, uh, then went to the School of Journalism at, uh, Lincoln University in Missouri and, uh, graduated there in the summer of 1952. And my first job was with the *Tri-State Defender*, uh, in Memphis.

JM: Yeah.

MN: And that was one of the *Defender's* chain papers. And, uh, I spent five years there doing some of everything.

JM: Yeah.

MN: Covered anything and everything that came along.

JM: Sure. These, um, these were years, obviously, when, um, when the, the pace and emphasis of racial change was accelerating but also meeting lots of early and very emphatic impediments. And I want to just ask a little bit about some of the early and substantial stories that you began to cover. Uh, Mr. Newson, I think when you were in Memphis with the *Defender*, you did work in both '55 in, uh, in, uh, Clinton – excuse me – in Hoxie, Arkansas, and then in '56 in Clinton, Tennessee. And I wonder if you can recall some of the details of those very early efforts at school desegregation.

MN: Yeah, those were very interesting, uh, entries into coverage of, uh, school desegregation. Uh, at that time, we had heard a lot of things about how difficult it would be, and, uh, places where there were large numbers of, uh, black citizens were supposed to be some of the toughest areas. Uh, places where there were smaller numbers of blacks, uh, were supposed to be pretty easy situations. It turned out not to be that way.

Uh, in Hoxie, uh, actually, media people were invited to come into the classrooms, ride the buses with the kids who were coming in, talk to some of the teachers in the classrooms, and that sort of thing. Uh, that was pretty unusual. And, the fact of the matter is it didn't happen anywhere else, [laughs] uh, that I went. Uh, it went along pretty smoothly there, uh, for a while.

And, uh, as you know, they had people who went around trying to stir up problems, uh, people such as Asa [Earl] Carter and John Kaspar. And, uh, they got in there, uh, after the schools had got started and fired up a lot of people, along with the KKK and some of the others. And, uh, eventually, uh, they had a lot of problems there.

Uh, Clinton was, uh, sort of a different story. Uh, at the time there were about five thousand, maybe four thousand people in the city. Uh, only about two hundred of them were black, and it was sort of a strange situation. That's a hilly country. Most of the black people

there lived up on what they called Foley Hill. Uh, you went up one way and you drove around the area and you came back down the same way.

Uh, they didn't have a high school there for blacks at all. Uh, blacks had to go to different counties, uh, to go to high school. And, uh, these kids, uh, who were going to integrate the school, they had to walk down this hill every morning. People would line up on both sides and yell stuff and throw stuff and that sort of thing.

Uh, back in those days, you know, there was no public accommodation situation, and, uh, you had to find someplace to stay when you were covering these stories. Uh, my situation in this case is that, uh, I was staying over in Knoxville, which is about eighteen miles away. Uh, every evening after things took place, uh, I'd head back out to Knoxville. That's when the people would come down from the hills, you know, and they'd be shooting off guns and they'd be shooting off firecrackers and, uh, trying to intimidate people, that sort of thing. [10:00]

They had a lot of trouble inside the school, but eventually it worked out, and then it got bad. Uh, there was a minister – just to let you know how bad it was, there was a white minister who walked down the hill one day with these kids, uh, and he lost his job. He got chased out of town. Uh, eventually, the governor had to call out the National Guard there to, uh, bring peace in that situation.

JM: Yeah, yeah. Um, Mr. Booker, I want to ask about, um, were you – you were in Chicago in '55, had not yet moved to D.C., I think. Is that right?

SB: That's right.

JM: When you first made your trip down – I think your first trip to Mississippi, as I have read, was to go down and to, uh, cover the work of two gentlemen, Gus Lee [note: JM misspoke

and intended Gus Courts] and Mr. George [W.] Lee, Pastor Lee, who were doing voter registration work in Humphreys County, Mississippi.

SB: Well, I went down – Emmett Till was from Chicago.

JM: Yeah.

SB: The man that was killed. And when he was, uh, killed, I decided that that would make a terrific story for *JET*. So, the photographer and myself decided we would go down to check on it. I had never been in the South. I was from – born in Baltimore, grew up in Youngstown, Ohio, and never covered the South at all. So, going into Mississippi was completely new to me. And we went down to check on his death, how the two men had gone in and, uh, killed him because he had whistled at a woman. I don't know if it was one of their wives or something. And we went down for that. And the South just was different from what I had expected.

JM: Yeah. You also, I think, uh, had developed a very close, uh, journalistic connection to, uh, Mrs. Till, Mamie Till Bradley.

SB: Well, I was with her. We, uh, went – I remember being with her when we stayed up all night waiting on the body to come in from, uh, Mississippi. And when it did come in, she demanded that the body be open, “so they – the world can see what they did to my boy.” And when they opened the casket in the funeral home, uh, I remember a piece of his skull fell off. And my photographer went over and reached over and picked it up and put it back on before he shot a picture. And it was a very gruesome scene. But she was a tough lady.

JM: Let me ask you, um, many questions about – kind of coming off that theme – but I wanted to ask you about, um, your photographer David Jackson.

SB: He was very good, a veteran photographer, and he could handle all of the, uh, emergencies that came up. In those days, the, uh, cameras were *big*. They weren't little like you put in your pocket, you know. And so, it was a very dangerous thing to be a photographer and to work in the South. And he was a pretty brave fellow. He just dared to do anything.

JM: Yeah, yeah. Thinking about the Till case and about, uh, school desegregation, I'm interested in hearing from both of you thoughts about how, um, the black press was evolving in the mid '50s. '54 had been a very tough year, with a recession and a lot of, um, uh, retrenchment in circulation figures for a lot of the black newspapers. And then these stories pulled the press forward in certain new ways. I'm interested in your thoughts about that.

SB: Well, *JET*'s circulation just took off when they ran the picture. They had to reprint, the first time they ever reprinted *JET* Magazine. [15:00] And there was a lot of interest in that case. And in the – uh, the entire black community was becoming aware of the need to *do* something about it.

JM: Yeah. Mr. Newson, did you want to –?

MN: Yeah, I think starting with the, uh, school ruling in 1954 – uh, the South was always a pretty tough place, and places like Mississippi, uh, were just, uh, uh, backwards, racially speaking. And, uh, we got this, uh, real [clears throat] hateful climate where people in the Congress and, uh, other leaders were speaking forcefully about, uh, the fact that they were not going to integrate schools, and we were having an awful lot of problems.

Uh, you mentioned George Lee, uh, one of the guys, uh, who was killed just for trying to, uh, get black folks to register to vote. Uh, he was actually one of two people who were killed, uh, in 1954 there, just before – in 1955, just before, uh, Emmett Till was killed. And, uh, the

thing about these murders is that, uh, nobody was being convicted. In neither of those two cases, nobody was convicted.

I went down for the funeral of, uh, George Lee. And, uh, strangely enough, a lot of people went down because, uh, that was one of the first times that Roy Wilkins, uh, had taken over as, uh, the head of the NAACP's operational body. And, uh, people wanted to see how tough he was going to be, or how strong he was going to be, uh, down in Mississippi. But, uh, I think, uh, Mississippi had a reputation for being one of the worst places.

Uh, and, uh, you were asking about the media, uh, the two papers, uh, in Mississippi – in Jackson, Mississippi – uh, to my mind were some of the worst. Uh, and there were a lot of bad ones, [laughs] uh, as far as coverage of civil rights was concerned, but, uh, they were two of the worst. Uh, the entire climate, uh, not just, uh, people being killed for, uh, doing the slightest type of things.

Uh, the case with Emmett Till: uh, he supposedly had whistled at some woman, uh, [Carolyn] Bryant, who ran a store with her husband, Roy [Bryant]. Uh, it happened that they were out of town, uh, the husband was out of town, and, uh, his half-brother, Milam, J.W. Milam, were out of town. They hadn't heard about that thing until, uh, one of, uh, Till's young friends mentioned it.

So, uh, as soon as we heard about, uh, him being missing, uh, that he had possibly whistled at a white woman, I went down and, uh, shot some pictures around. It was a little whistle-stop place, uh, four or five stores and pretty much nothing else. And I interviewed the grandfather out in the cotton field where he was, uh, doing some work there. He really wanted to stay down. He said that was going to be one of his most profitable years. He was share farming with this German guy. But, uh, his wife left immediately, uh, and headed back, uh, to Chicago.

And it, uh, it didn't take long in those days, uh, to get a trial underway. [Laughs] We just finished something that, uh, went on for three years. And so, uh, I think they killed him around August the twenty-eighth or something like that, and, uh, we were down there for the trial on September the nineteenth. Uh, so that was a very short, short period.

Uh, it was, uh, to me – I guess I was about twenty-eight at the time, um – it was a pretty, uh, tough situation down there. Uh, some of the guys who were more veteran, uh, saw it a little different, but, uh, it was [20:00] pretty tense situation for me. I had gone down earlier and interviewed the sheriff, uh, George Smith, whose guys actually, uh, made the arrests. But when we got over – and he was someone you could talk to, you could interview – but when we got over where the trial was being held over in Tallahatchie County, it was different story.

We ran into Sheriff [H.C.] Strider. Uh, he hadn't done much of a job of trying to, uh, get witnesses to do something in the case. And, uh, I guess I was selected one day to, uh, go out and try to, with some NAACP people, see if we could round up some witnesses who would be there. Actually, the sheriff was going to testify and did testify on behalf of the guys who had done the murder. But, uh, I went out, uh – we changed clothes and went out wearing something, something like plantation workers would, uh, usually be wearing.

We did round up a couple of people who, uh, did actually testify in the case. And, uh, I think, uh, it was important. The NAACP was pretty much, uh, handling that end of the case. Uh, and, uh, it was three people who went along. They were all NAACP people. Our driver was Medgar Evers, um, who drove us to all those backyard plantations and plains where we were trying to find witnesses back there.

But, uh, that was quite interesting. And later, uh, I think that night, uh, some of the other press guys, black and white, went out with police officers, and they made arrangements to, uh, have a couple of people testify in the trial.

JM: Let's pause here just a minute.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: We're back.

JM: Okay. We're back after a short break. Um, Mr. Newson, you were talking about some of the, some of the strategies and approaches you used in, uh, in and around Money, Mississippi, during the trial; for example, changing clothes and going out to search for witnesses in that very unusual and exceptional situation. I'd be interested in having both of you talk a little bit about generally how you – your ideas and strategies for going into communities in very tense situations as black reporters and doing work in very tense and potentially dangerous situations.

SB: Well, we had just started a stringer system, and that was, in all the rural areas of the South, we had people who would submit articles or ideas every week and we would pay for the best ones. Now, these people not only became informers for the articles, but they also became informers for news developing and guides when we would come into their community and report it. So, we developed a huge new audience in an area that had been forgotten.

And, uh, I remember many times when these special stringers became the real sources of news *JET* carried exclusively. We would send a photographer and reporter in, and this stringer would lead them around the community to where they wouldn't be hurt and they could come up with exclusive news, which kept *JET* full.

I also had a column, weekly column, at *JET*, "Ticker Tape [U.S.A.]," [Mr. Booker's newspaper column, which ran for 52 years], where I could run two or three sentences about little

events that happened all across the country. I used this to carry more information that these stringers would send up that never got in the newspapers until *JET* ran it. And it amazed me how the community just sort of ignited, lit up over it, and it was very valuable for us.

MN: Yeah, we had the stringer system, too. I guess most of the publications did at that time, because, uh, you didn't have a lot of bureaus in those places. Uh, because we were so close to Mississippi, we were in and out of there an awful lot. Um, when I talk about the culture down there, I think the, uh, [25:00] Till case was a good example of the kind of culture you ran into when you were covering those kind of stories. Uh, I think a lot of the guys, uh, changed clothes quite often when they were down there. Uh, the search for witnesses was the only time that I had changed clothes. I always went the way I worked when I was at the office or around town.

But, uh, you ran into situations where a lot of people were very helpful. Some people were scared to talk; you know, their jobs were at stake and, uh, that sort of thing. And, uh, people were somewhat beaten down, uh, because of the system. Uh, an example – of course, it was not just, uh – you know, little people on the street who would do things or say things, uh, who would actually kill people sometimes. A lot of bodies were being found, and, uh, people were actually afraid.

But, uh, the *entire* system worked that way. The courthouse where they were having the Till trial – of course, it was segregated and all. Most of them were. But, uh, how did, uh, the press operate? Uh, the sheriff told us when we got there, “There will be no integration in my courthouse.” Uh, in addition to that, uh, there was a press table there for white reporters and photographers and whatnot, uh, but not for black reporters. We were, as often was the case, to sit in the audience and that sort of thing.

Well, it happened that Congressman Charles Diggs from Detroit had, uh, come down as an observer. And, uh, he and some of the, uh, veteran reporters complained to the judge about the situation. And, uh, so eventually, they did set up a table off to the side, uh, where reporters could work, and, uh, some of the other people who were there, uh, lawyers and whatnot, sat at the same table over there. So, uh, that was sort of the condition that you worked under everywhere. Uh, you could hear what you could hear.

Uh, I remember covering a case, a rape case, where some whites were involved with having raped a co-ed down at Tallahassee, the University of Florida A&M. And, uh, most of the time I was sitting up in the balcony, uh, you know, trying to hear as best you could. But, uh, quite often, uh, that was just the situation. Uh, every single, uh, facet of life was pretty much segregated.

JM: Yeah.

MN: And, uh, but, uh, you went out there to do a job. And most of us thought that it was very important, because, uh, newspapers had a way of, uh, writing what they wanted to write and, uh, leaving out what they wanted to leave out.

The first time I saw a story about Till being killed, it was probably two or three inches, uh, in the *Commercial Appeal* or the *Press Scimitar*, one of the two there in Memphis. Once you get down there, uh, [laughs] it's a little different situation, and, uh, I was just, uh, appalled at how afraid people were to, uh, talk about the situation, uh – and for good reason.

JM: Yeah, yeah. Let me ask you both about, um, [clears throat] what memories especially come to your mind when you think about the work you did covering Little Rock in '57?

SB: Well, we were out in Little Rock very early with a team, photographer and reporter, and we stayed on that case. I got to know all the kids, their parents, even before the story broke like it did. I think that was good to know stories like that and then write it so that people could get an idea of who these people were, what they were going through. Rather than to say, "Six kids showed up at the school," you've got a chance to go to the inside, and how the community rallied to help them keep up their morale. [30:00]

But another thing *JET* did is opened a Washington Bureau, and that was very unusual in those days. And we had a big bureau, so we covered Congress; we covered the different government departments, the programs, and state governments, the governor, the legislature, and we did a lot of, uh, material that gave us enough material to fill our magazine and to come up with unusual ideas for *Ebony* [Magazine].

JM: Yeah.

MN: I think, uh, Little Rock turned out to be, uh, one of the most important of all the civil rights cases. Uh, it was sort of a long drawn-out sort of a situation. Uh, first off, uh, arrangements had been made, uh, for the nine youngsters who were selected to integrate the school, and, uh, on the verge of the day when they were supposed to, uh, [laughs] enter school, uh, Governor [Orville] Faubus changed his mind and, uh, said school was not going to be integrated. Uh, and, uh, to see that [laughs] his orders were carried out, he called out the National Guard.

My first day over there, uh, I was walking across Park, uh – the school was located there at Park and Sixteenth – and, uh, I was met by a colonel who came out and greeted me, uh, and, uh, told me that I wouldn't be able to work up there, uh, because of my – because my very

presence, uh, might result in problems. Now, they had a bunch of white reporters over there and photographers and all that sort of thing.

But, uh, to make sure that I got his message, uh, he had some of his troops to escort me out of the area, uh, back to my car. And, uh, you know, as it happened, you always pick up a couple of guys who are going to follow you, you know, with all kind of threats and that sort of thing. But, uh, it was two of them, so I wasn't too worried about them. You know, I had my camera and my strobe unit and that sort of thing.

But, uh, this situation in Little Rock, uh, as Booker was explaining, we spent a lot of time, uh, hanging around the home of L.C. and Daisy Bates. Uh, Mrs. Bates, uh, was head of the NAACP, and, uh, she was the one who was actually, uh, working closest with the nine students. And, uh, you know, we were hanging around their paper, hanging around the home. The kids would come in, and dancing and doing what kids do, raiding the refrigerator, and that sort of thing. So, you did get to know them, uh, pretty well.

But, uh, the next time we were up there when, uh, the kids were supposed to go to school, uh, we bumped into this big crowd of people who were lined up on the streets out there. And, uh, there were four of us: uh, myself and L. Alex Wilson, uh, who had been my boss at the *Tri-State Defender*. This was my first story for the *Afro-American* newspapers in Baltimore. And, uh, as we went up, you know, the mob was saying things, "Where are you guys going?" "You're never going to get back from up there," and this kind of stuff. [Someone coughs] And, uh, we were pulling out, uh, ID cards and that kind of stuff. It didn't mean *anything*, and they [laughs] told you, you know, "That doesn't mean anything. You're black." And, you know, they were calling you all kind of names and that sort of thing.

So, eventually, uh, someone from up front yells that, uh, the kids were getting into the school. Uh, they had come around another way. And, uh, that's when all hell broke loose. Uh, they started attacking *us*. And, uh, I suppose you've seen some of the pictures of L. Alex Wilson, uh, getting kicked and beat up, and guys climbing on his back and hitting him with bricks, and that sort of thing.

Uh, I was, uh, sort of walking at that time with, uh, Jimmy Hicks, who was with the *Amsterdam News* at the time. So, uh, we sort of, uh, ran along to, uh, stay out of the, uh, way of these guys; I just took a few licks, you know, [35:00] that sort of thing. But, uh, L. Alex Wilson, I had worked with him for five years at the *Defender*, and, uh, I was trying to encourage him to, uh, [laughs] come along with us.

But, uh, it turned out that, uh, L. Alex Wilson had had a problem with the KKK down in Leesburg, Florida, uh, where I had gone to school, uh, after I had reached the, uh, senior level. Uh, I didn't know, uh, Mr. Wilson, but, uh, we rode to and from work a lot of times down there. And we ran into a little incident one evening when, uh, we had stopped at an icehouse down there. And, uh, a problem came up, and, uh, he, uh – after that, uh, some guy was waving a gun at him, and he just walked slowly along. And I didn't know what was going on or what the situation was, so I jumped out and sort of interceded and told the guy we were leaving and getting away.

But that was the first time, uh, that he told me that he had run into problems with the KKK down in Florida. And he had run. And he made a pledge to himself that never again would he run under that sort of a situation. So, uh, that's why he wouldn't run at Little Rock. And that's why he got beat up pretty badly. And, uh, his wife, Emogene, uh, she still thinks that, uh, the beating he took there, uh, sort of hastened his, uh, early demise.

But, uh, the reason I say that that was one of the most important of all the civil rights cases, that, after they attacked us that day, uh, with the NAACP and others, uh, complaining about the fact that we weren't getting any protection down there, uh, President [Dwight D.] Eisenhower decided to send in the military. And, uh, what that meant was that, uh, no more would people be able to use violence to actually prevent desegregation activities from taking place. And that was extremely important.

Uh, [laughs] as a matter of fact, I thought we would never see that sort of a situation again, but, uh, later, as I found out, uh, in going down to Mississippi at the, uh, case of James Meredith, people were still trying to do it the violent way. But, uh, that was an extremely important case, and, uh, it meant that, uh, people would have protection: both reporters and kids who were trying to get into these schools, uh.

They were some of the bravest kids that, uh, all over the country. Uh, they were absolutely fantastic. And people would say, uh, "Why are you going out there?" You know? And these kids would go out there – uh, you had to be there to, uh – one of the stories I always, uh, look back on is, uh, one morning when those kids *weren't* supposed to go to school, uh, one of them didn't get the word, uh, Elizabeth Eckford [one of the Little Rock Nine]. And, uh, she got up there by herself and, uh, the Guard wouldn't let her through. Uh, I think at first she thought they would be friends of hers, but, uh, she realized eventually that they weren't. And, uh, she started to leave, and a group of white people surrounded her and just gave her a hard time, absolutely.

And, uh, we weren't up there, because they weren't supposed to be there that day. And as soon as I heard about it, I went out to her house and was talking to her. And, uh, you know, she said something that a fifteen-year-old kid would say, uh, "I never thought people could be so

cruel.” And, you know, I made it the lead of my story, and it got played in the paper. Uh, someone else also did a very good story on it.

But those were the kind of things you would run into out there. And, from time to time, uh, you just had to stop writing and just listen to people, uh, talking about what they went through as individuals out there trying to just get an education.

JM: Can we take a break for just a minute here? [40:00]

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: We’re set. We’re rolling.

JM: Okay. We’re back on after a short break. Um, I want to ask you both about, um – before we turn to the Freedom Ride, I want to ask you both about – as far as you can recall, what was your, what was your mood about the prospects for race relations, say, by the – just, just the early ’60s? Kennedy has been elected there in the fall of ’60 and, um – but, you know, you’d seen things like Little Rock, pluses and minuses. I guess the plus is that, um, Eisenhower exerted federal authority. But minuses are – it’s a pretty tough situation, still. And, um, do you recall how you – what your mood about the prospects for race relations were?

SB: Well, Eisenhower, he just, when it came to civil rights, was a blank. I remember after he went out of office, I went over to interview him at his retirement. And he said to me, “Of all the questions you ask me, all of them are on civil rights!” And I said, “Now is my opportunity.” [Laughs] I said, “That’s the one subject you never talked about while you were President. You always – you never came out.”

I give Kennedy credit. He started it. He got it going. And then, unfortunately, he got killed.

JM: Yeah.

SB: And to show the difference, I was named a pallbearer [SB misspoke and intended pool reporter] at his funeral, something unheard of in those days.

JM: Yeah, yeah.

SB: But he really opened it up to the press. I had a seat in the second row. He really not only talked it, but he did things to show blacks, “You’re a part of this, too.”

JM: Yeah. Mr. Newson, do you remember your mood around the time of Kennedy’s election and – ?

MN: Yeah. I think, I think everybody, uh, sort of expected, uh, somewhat more than, uh, what was actually done. Uh, they set a good mood, uh, with some of the speeches they were making and that sort of thing, which was good for the country, because there *had* to be another voice out there besides, uh, what some of the media were doing and what some of the, uh, Southern lawmakers were doing and what they were saying, uh, you know, uh, about, uh, pulling out of the Union and, uh, disobeying laws and that kind of stuff.

Uh, we had, uh, a lot of different organizations working tirelessly, you know, the NAACP and the Urban League and CORE, uh, the, uh, young people in SNCC. Some of the most encouraging things, uh, were some of the, uh, courts, some of the judges, uh, who started making some very important rulings, uh, knocking down Jim Crow barriers, uh, Johnson [federal judge Frank Minis Johnson], Waring [federal judge J. Waites Waring], and some of the others, uh, who were very, very important, uh, in setting the stage for some of the progress, uh, that would, uh, take place later.

JM: Yeah.

MN: Uh, all these guys – all these things were encouraging. Uh, I don’t know if anybody saw the changes coming, uh, the way they eventually came about, uh, as earlier.

Because now people talk about the '50s and the '60s, but people had been [laughs] fighting a long, long time. This struggle had been going on for ages. People were getting killed out there. Uh, we had a family in north Florida get dynamited, uh, during, you know, one holiday season, Christmas holiday season. So, uh, it was not just that one period.

But I do believe that, uh, when they killed Emmett Till, uh, [45:00] supposedly for whistling at a white woman, uh, I think people took sort of a different attitude. Uh, now they're killing our kids. And, uh, kids also took a little different attitude. He was a fourteen-year-old kid – and, uh, I think a lot of the young people, uh, began to, uh, become more assertive and more active. Uh, a lot of adults, uh, became more active, uh, in putting themselves on the line to help bring about some of the changes that, uh, would take place.

Uh, people really don't know about a lot of the activities that were taking place, a lot of the, uh, prices that people paid. Uh, you know, I remember being at a little church greeting movement down in, uh, Mississippi, not too far from where, uh, Money was located. And, uh, we had people inside, including some of the top civil rights people. The speaker there was, uh, a professor at, uh, Howard University.

And outside, you have the police, the KKK, and others, shooting people's pictures. Uh, they were doing that so that they could kick people off the plantations and fire them and that kind of stuff. And, uh, during the meeting, uh, we had another one of those moments where people would sing songs about not letting them turn around, turn them around. And, uh, after every song, somebody would get up and talk about an experience that they had had.

And eventually this guy, I guess he was a middle-aged guy or something, he gets up. And, uh, he was telling them, uh, about his situation. And the situation was that he had been on this farm for ages, sharecropper, and, uh, he had gone over to try to register to vote. And now,

uh, the owner was telling him that he had a few days to find someplace to go. He's got this family, several kids. Uh, he's got no job, no transportation, no actual place to go, and he tells these people, "Don't do anything for me. Don't worry about me. Just get out there and try to register and vote." Uh, man, it's one of those moments that you have out there.

And, uh, they raised money for the guy. Uh, James Farmer was there, [Medgar] Evers was there, and some others. They would say that, uh, more money would be coming. But, uh, that was kind of pressure these people were actually living under. Uh, you've got the police and fire trucks running up and down outside the church, with the bells clanging and ringing, and, uh, shooting people's pictures so they could turn them over to the authorities. And people were getting fired left and right: people with no money, no funds, no place to go.

So, uh, they were paying, uh, a real heavy price down there, and you didn't hear about those stories, uh, a lot of times. But, uh, they were going on. And, you know, some of the bravest people out there were guys like, uh, [Bob] Moses, SNCC guys who would [laughs] settle down in these little towns and *stay* – for weeks! You know?

JM: Yeah.

MN: I'd go out here on a story and, uh, when things cooled off a little bit, you know, I was gone back to Baltimore. But these people were there day in and day out. And, uh, I don't know how some of them did it. [Laughs]

JM: Yeah. Let me ask you both about a, about an experience where you were very, very close to, uh, some very, very tough history, which was the Freedom Ride. And I'm interested, if you can think back, about how each of you first was asked to consider participating in the bus ride as a journalist. Do you remember who first reached out to you, or how the contact was made?

SB: Well, on the Freedom Ride – I went to [James] Farmer and said, “Look, I want to go with you to see what happens [50:00] with a photographer.” And, uh, we went, not as participants, but as observers. But I don’t know that there was any difference, because people didn’t take time to say, “He’s observer,” or “participant.” And, uh, that was an eye-opener.

And we went all the way. We went from Washington – after the, uh, Selma and that area, when one bus was burned – and, uh, Moses was on that bus. I was on the other bus. But when we got to Birmingham, I looked out the window and I could see these crowds, these people with chains and all that kind of stuff. I ducked out the back of the bus and, luckily, hailed a black cab driver, who took me to, uh, uh, I can’t think of the guy’s name.

JM: Reverend Shuttlesworth’s house?

SB: Shuttlesworth’s house, that’s right. And, uh, called [Attorney General Robert] Kennedy’s office and said, “Man, you’ve got to get down here! These people are in trouble.”

JM: Yeah.

SB: And they say, “Well, you saved lives.” Well, boy, that was secondary! That was a real experience. But my contribution, I hope – I’m just finishing a book of my experiences on the frontline. And, in another two or three months, I hope to be able to take it to an agent and say, “Look, can we get this published?”

JM: Wonderful.

SB: But in it I’ve put in a lot of material that’s not in any of the books on, uh, the rise of blacks, because I was in many different events that had different angles, where you could see a lot of problems you didn’t see from this area, but you saw over there.

JM: Right. And one follow-up on – because you were in D.C. as bureau chief, you were able to forge some relationships with people inside the administration.

SB: Yeah. I had a lot of contact within, matter of fact it was the FBI – oh, I had all kinds of close [52:37] with the Presidents, you know, with the, uh, administration, with the departments. And you could see what you could do. Plus, I was a slick fellow in those days, not anymore. [Laughter]

[Laughing] I was a Westinghouse radio commentator [MN clears throat] three times a week, so with the black community – I could get over in the white community and do things to explain what blacks were doing here. And that really opened up a lot of – that, uh – I could see where, you know, blacks had a little press, the daily press. But you get over here, and dropping, uh, commentary on some subject would create as much stir as it would in the black community.

JM: Yeah.

SB: So, I played a lot of kind of games in those days. I'm too old to do that now.
[Laughter]

JM: Mr. Newson, how did you get –?

MN: I always used to like to work with Simeon Booker, because, uh, uh, he was always a guy you could depend on, and, uh, you didn't have to worry about some guy trying – you know, going out there and saying something or doing something that would get you in more [laughs] trouble than you were already in just being out there.

Uh, we got a call from, uh, Jim Farmer. Uh, he wanted someone to come out two weeks, uh, and go on the journey with them. And, uh, I agreed to go. Uh, at the time, uh, I had already accepted an invitation to come down to New Orleans to cover a voting rights hearing, uh, that was being held by the Civil Rights Commission. So, uh, the day they left, on May 4th, 1961, I had gone down to do that story and, uh, I came back and had a few things to do in the office. So, I didn't catch up with the Freedom Riders until they were at, uh, North Carolina A&T College.

I'd just like to mention a little story [55:00] that I did down in North Carolina [MN misspoke and intended Louisiana]. It's one of those stories that don't get much play.

JM: Sure.

MN: Uh, we had a, uh, registrar there who was testifying over and over and over how she would give these little simple tests, and, uh, *all* the white people could pass the test, but, uh, none of the black people could pass the test. And, uh, that's why none of them were being registered there in that area of Louisiana. So, uh, the lawyers from the Civil Rights Commission, they got her on the stand and they started asking her some of these little simple questions that, uh, she said that the black applicants couldn't answer, and a few other little simple questions.

And she sat there and she couldn't answer any of those questions, not *any* of them. And, uh, [someone coughs] we [laughs], we ran a big headline all the way across the paper, saying that, uh, "Dixie Voter Official Flunks Own Test." And, uh, you know, that's the sort of thing – that's the way things were being done, uh, in the South.

But, after I had caught up with the, uh, Freedom Riders, uh, what they were doing, you know, mixed groups would go off, twos and threes at the time, and go into these stations to test to see whether they could use the facilities and that sort of thing. Uh, I guess I shouldn't go through a long story, but there had been three rulings that made it possible for them to do this.

Uh, CORE had tried it back in '47. Uh, didn't get too far, because they really didn't have the legal support. And, uh, uh, before then, there was a woman out of Baltimore who was coming out of, uh, Virginia, and, uh, she refused to give up her seat, uh, so she won a case in 1946 that dealt with, uh, inter [that is, interstate] travel.

Uh, after that, uh, there was the Rosa Parks situation – about ten years later, the Rosa Parks situation down in Montgomery. And, uh, eventually, uh, four women represented by

attorney Fred Gray – uh, neither of them was, uh, Mrs. Parks, whose arrest had led to this famous boycott, uh, over a year long. That was the most incredible thing. The world had never seen anything like that in the United States, where these people got together and refused to ride the buses for that sort of period. But, uh, these four women who were plaintiffs in this case, they won an intra [that is, intrastate] travel case.

Uh, then after that, uh, a young fellow named Bruce Boynton, uh, he refused to give up his seat in, uh, one of the bus stations. And that resulted in a case that covered facilities [*Boynton v. Virginia*, decided by the U.S. Supreme Court on December 5, 1960]. So, now, you know, you had, uh, the three things done.

So, when I, uh, watched them for a while, and, uh, the first real blood I saw out there was, uh, now-Congressman John Lewis. Uh, they got down to a little place, Rock Hill, South Carolina, and he went in, and a couple of other people went in with him. Uh, two white people, uh, went in with him, and they got attacked and got thrown out of that place. And, uh, Lewis was pretty bloody when he came out.

Uh, shortly after that, uh, when we were in Atlanta, uh, Martin Luther King came over. Uh, people would, uh, have these meetings, you know, where they would, uh, greet the Freedom Riders and that sort of thing. Uh, not everybody was happy about what was going on, though. [Laughs] But, uh, Martin Luther King had, uh, told our good friend, Simeon Booker, here, and some others that, uh, he had heard that the KKK and others were planning to, uh, see that the Freedom Riders never got out of Alabama alive. And, uh, [laughs] that was a pretty serious, uh, situation.

So, uh, to make matters worse, uh, the day we were going to be leaving for Anniston, Alabama, and that bus was going to be leaving to go another route headed for Birmingham, uh,

James Farmer learned that, uh, his father had died, and his mother wanted him to come, uh, back right away. So, uh, we had that situation where we didn't have our main leader there. [1:00:00] Uh, but they were going to push on anyway.

I was on the Greyhound bus that day, and, uh, out on the road, um, another Greyhound bus hailed us down and told us there was a pretty nasty mob up at, uh, Anniston, Alabama station, at the Anniston, Alabama Greyhound station. And when we got there, sure enough, uh, [laughs] there was a pretty angry mob there. And, uh, man, they were calling the Freedom Riders all kind of names and, uh, you know, "niggers," and "communists," and "come on out and integrate Alabama," and that sort of stuff. Uh, they were beating on the buses, the bus, with chains and sticks and whatever else they had. Uh, the bus driver had to take care of a little business there, but he would lock the door when he got out, so nobody could get on the bus.

And, uh, I guess I had another one of those little experiences. There was a woman on the bus, uh, that knew nothing about the Freedom Rides. She was coming home from a funeral. She was sitting across the aisle from me and, uh, she was saying things like, "Why are they doing this to us?" And, "I don't want to die here like this." And she was down on her knees between the two seats there.

So, I go over and try to, uh, tell her what was going on, that sort of thing, [laughs] and still watching the window because they were trying to break out the windows there. And, uh, she told me, uh, I could use her name in my story. Her name was Roberta Holmes, I believe. And, uh, eventually, uh, the bus driver got back in, and we took off.

And, uh, about the time we got to the edge of the city, you heard that, uh, sound of tires going down. And, uh, you could look back and you could see a line of cars that were following us. And there was a little roadster that stayed in front of the bus to keep the bus from picking up

speed, so we were sort of trapped there. Uh, that's when we found out that, uh, there were a couple of white state troopers, uh, on the bus. We didn't know about it; they were in plainclothes.

And, uh, they started again breaking out windows and banging on the bus and daring people to come out and that sort of thing. Uh, one of these guys, uh, one of the state officers, uh, E.L. Cowling, uh, he pulled his pistol and, uh, stood in the doorway, uh, to keep anybody from getting on the bus. And, uh, that sort of saved us, [laughs] because, uh, they finally made a break through one of the windows and, uh, they threw this firebomb thing in the seat just behind me, which was an empty seat. And I got a few burns on the back of the ear and that sort of thing, but, uh, nothing serious.

Suddenly, it was pitch black on that bus. And, uh, a couple of people got out of windows and caught rides. Uh, several of us were sort of trapped on the bus there until we could get out. And I said, "Well, I'm going to be the last guy off this bus. Nobody gets trapped on here." So, I just put a handkerchief over my mouth and nose and that sort of thing, and hung around as long as I could. And it started getting hot on there. [Laughs] It was time to get off.

Uh, so we got off. And I tell you, uh, when you stepped off that bus and you looked around and you saw these people crawling around, trying to get the, uh, smoke out of their chest, and, uh, people crawling and coughing and gagging, uh, it was one of those sights that make you wonder why, uh, Americans are doing that sort of thing to fellow Americans, uh, who were just trying to exercise their rights. But, uh, eventually, that bus burned right down, broad open daylight. They burned down this expensive Greyhound bus.

Uh, by the time I got off and saw these people shooting pictures, I realized that I had stuck my camera up under the seat. Uh, it was pretty dangerous to be getting off in that situation

with a camera around your neck, so, uh, it burned up with the, uh, bus. But I was able to, uh, contact the Greyhound Company and get the bus back, uh – get the camera back. It's been on view now over at the Newseum in Washington, uh, where, you know, people can see it if they want to. [1:05:00]

But, uh, that was a pretty shaky occasion [laughs]. Uh, the ones of us who were on that bus, uh, most of us, the ones who didn't get out and catch rides, we were taken to the hospital there in the city, and, uh, we were just sort of stuck there. The young guy who was in charge of the bus, uh, in the absence of Farmer, uh, Joe Perkins, he was calling all around trying to, uh, get somebody to help us get out of there. The hospital, you know, they were telling you, "You can't stay here." And the police were saying, uh, "We can only protect you to the city lines." [Laughs] You know, it was kind of dark out there, you know. We could hear those people out there, still hanging around. Uh, eventually, he reached, uh, Reverend Shuttlesworth, uh, over in Birmingham, and he agreed to send over a caravan of cars to, uh, get us out of there.

And, uh, while we were waiting around, uh – at the time, the *Afro-American* was doing about thirteen editions. The national edition, uh, went to press on Sunday night. So, I was able to step outside and get a telephone and call the night editor, tell him what kind of story I would have the next day. [Laughs] And, uh, asked him to call my wife and tell her that I was okay. But, uh, it was kind of tough duty sometimes out there.

JM: It sure is. Let's take a little break, John.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

MN: [Speaking to SB] You got to talk more, man.

SB: Oh, man, I'm doing fine. [Clears throat]

JM: We're back on after a short break. I want to, I want to pick up on that day March – uh, May the fourteenth, 1961. I'm just, I'm just so struck by how, so close each of you came to, you know, the prospect of just very serious injury or death, um, in Anniston and then, when you stepped off that bus, uh, in Birmingham at the terminal, of course, people were getting beaten so badly. And somehow, folks just missed catching a look at you before you could get in that cab.

SB: Well, they didn't get much of a chance. [Laughter] The cab just happened to show up. And when it showed up, I was gone!

JM: Yeah.

SB: But, uh – well, it was a very close moment.

JM: Yeah.

SB: But we had so many close moments, you know, because that was part of the life.

JM: Yeah.

SB: And you just accepted it.

JM: Right. I wonder, um, I'm thinking about, I'm thinking about the stretch of time between the Freedom Ride and the March on Washington, those couple of years. And I remember, um, the speech that John Lewis gave at the March on Washington, and it was full of so much frustration with the federal government for its reluctance, the Kennedy administration, for its reluctance to step in and aid people in the South who were suffering, uh, white violence. And I'm wondering, uh, kind of how each of you felt coming out of an experience like the Freedom Ride – the Freedom Rides and what perspectives you came away with, on that question or others, just what it left you feeling and thinking.

MN: Go on, Simeon.

SB: Well, my angle was to dig deeper in coverage of this underclass of blacks, opening it up so more of them are given an opportunity. That's the only way you're going to do anything, because if people can't get an education and training, they're not going to get jobs or this or that. And so, we at *JET* and *Ebony* tried to educate and reach them, inspire them to send their kids to school, take an interest in education, cleanliness, health, all those things. But that's a sort of an inward process. But it's one that you have to use as brother to brother to sister for it to work. And you don't get a lot of press or play, because it's not front-page news. And that's one of the real problems that you have.

MN: I think that was another one of those situations where, um, the ambitions and the aspirations of, uh, [1:10:00] black people didn't exactly coincide with, uh, the administration's, uh, viewpoints, uh, how they saw their own jobs and what this kind of thing, um – how it could effect them, uh, in a different way. Uh, there were just so many, uh, things that the general public didn't know about [clears throat] that reporters were able to learn *some* of the background about, uh, things that, uh, J. Edgar Hoover was doing, uh, at the Justice Department. Uh, you know, we saw these guys out there, uh, FBI guys, uh, watching, but then they would come to you later and ask you what happened out there. You know, particularly Little Rock, [laughs] man, when, I'm trying to get away – some guy comes by later that night, you know, to ask me what took place, and I saw him standing over on the sidewalk.

Uh, but, here again, uh, you know, not just to keep saying about one person, I think John Lewis and some of his younger folk, uh, weren't too happy, uh, with the way that, uh, the administration, the Kennedy administration, was, uh, trying to slow down some of the efforts, uh, at bringing about changes. And, uh, that became quite an issue there.

But, uh, the March was one of the historic things. Uh, I was sort of happy – it didn't happen often, but I was, uh – it was close by Baltimore, so I took my wife, and, uh, a neighbor who was the wife of one of our photographers went along, and we were able to get that, uh, see and take part in that event. But it was a great event, uh, and, uh, sometimes now you look back on it.

You get, you know, you got to hear Martin Luther King a lot. Uh, a lot of this thing that turned out to be so great, he had done over and over, uh, a number of times. But, uh, [laughs] he got rolling that day. The circumstances were so much different, you know, with, uh, all these white union people and church leaders and everybody else, uh, bringing themselves together to, uh, demand that, uh, changes be made. It took on a completely different light, uh, and the impact of it was just great. Uh, it was just great.

And, uh, he's another guy that people don't understand, uh, what he was going through, uh, a lot of times. Uh, I know, uh, shortly before his death, uh, they were planning the, uh, the Poor People's March on Washington, and I went down to Atlanta to interview him. Uh, and, uh, as usual, uh, he was running late, and he and Andy Young had to catch a flight, uh, after they finally came out of this big meeting with all these people – poor people, Indians, Latinos, and whatnot.

So, uh, I had to interview him, actually, in a car going to the airport, and, uh, that's kind of different. You know, you've got Andy Young there, you've got his wife there, you've got Harry Belafonte there, and, uh, [laughs] you're trying to interview him about some of the problems that were going on. Uh, you know, the FBI was taping him and leaking stuff. Uh, some of the, uh, civil rights leaders were saying that his position on the war was causing him to

lose sight of, uh, what he was doing, and, uh, that sort of thing. They were having trouble raising money at the time.

And, uh, so, you know, eventually I just had to ask him, uh, “What’s your reaction to all this that people are saying, that, uh, you’re sort of failing at what you’re supposed to be doing.” And he said something that really struck me. You know, he said that – and I’m surprised to hear it – he said, “*If* I’m failing, then you might say, according to the way some people look at it, that Jesus Christ failed, because he got himself, uh, hung on the cross.” And, uh, you know, I think that story ran about the middle of March, uh, in the year that he died. It was just a few weeks before, uh, he died. And, uh, it was sort of a strange thing, you know, that, uh –

But he, he was under a lot of stress that a lot of people didn’t know and didn’t appreciate, uh, that he was struggling under all the charges about Communist associations and all, all the, uh, rumors, the type of stuff that, uh, a lot of people hadn’t printed before that they started printing and, uh, and, uh – to try to bring him down.

But, uh, he was quite an interesting guy and, uh, he was a brave guy. Uh, not an awful lot of people would have gone through what he was, what he went through, and kept the, uh, front that he kept out there and, uh, plugging away as he plugged away, day after day.

JM: Yeah.

MN: I sort of admired the guy.

JM: Yeah. Mr. Booker, um, do you have, do you have special recollections of Martin Luther King and thoughts and – in all the work you did in covering the movement and Reverend King?

SB: Well, he was a very unusual man. I’ve never seen him disappointed or defeated. He always seemed to be on the make, on the go. He never – I couldn’t ever figure it out – he never

gave up. [MN laughs] And that's – he was in some very difficult situations, but he always, uh, stayed out, with a little prayer to himself, and he kept on. A lot of people would have said, "Oh, the hell with it," [laughter] gone on and done something else. He never did. He stayed with it.

JM: Did either of you cover Malcolm X?

SB: No, I didn't – that was an area – Malcolm X, Stokely [Carmichael], that whole crowd I never paid much attention to. I was – the whole deal was to grab the press attention. They were in it. They knew how to grab certain sections of it. And the rest was Roy Wilkins, Whitney [Young] – and I remember Whitney when he died somewhere in Europe [note: Whitney Young died in Nigeria], I had to fly over to – on a plane – pick up his body.

MN: Nigeria.

SB: That was a sad –

MN: Nigeria.

SB: Yeah, wherever.

MN: Yeah. I think we were on that flight together. We went down on Air Force One. Uh, President Nixon flew down to participate in the services down there for Whitney Young. And, uh, Simeon and I were among the people who went down to, uh, cover that event.

JM: Yeah. Mr. Newson, let me take you back for just a minute. Is there more that you would like to add about, uh – obviously, we could talk for hours on this theme, but are there other things that come to your mind when you think about Martin Luther King, covering him over the years?

MN: No, actually, uh, I didn't get to cover him too much. Uh, we had a staff in Baltimore and, uh, usually when he came to Baltimore, uh, he was covered by some of the other staff people there. I sat in on a lot of the speeches he was making [clears throat], but I didn't

actually cover him. It was, uh, fascinating to see him and [Reverend Ralph] Abernathy working together. [Laughs] Abernathy would pass the basket and collect the money, and, uh, King would make those great speeches that he was known for. But, uh, they were quite a twosome when they were working together.

Uh, I was down in, uh, Alabama in the Black Belt there for a while after, uh, King died and Abernathy was trying to, uh, carry on his work. And, uh, it just wasn't working, you know, the way, [1:20:00] uh, everyone had hoped it would. But, uh, he gave it his best shot at it, but, you know, he didn't have the, uh, personality that Dr. King had.

JM: Was either of you in, uh – [clears throat] did either of you cover the Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City in August of '64, with the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, uh, controversy?

MN: No.

JM: No?

MN: I covered four conventions, uh, two Republicans, two, uh, Democrats. There were a couple in Miami Beach and New York and that, uh, significant one, the Republican one in Kansas, in Missouri there when the, uh, conservative wing took over the, uh, took over the party.

JM: Yeah.

MN: But no, I didn't. I didn't do '64.

JM: Um-hmm. Um, one more question and then we can take a little break and come back and finish up. I'm interested in your thoughts about evolving relations between black journalists and white journalists and the earliest efforts at beginning, now, to staff some black journalists onto larger white papers in – just past this period. I'm interested in your thoughts on, on the relations between the black press and the white press.

SB: Well, I thought there was a relationship, [but] they had different standards. The white press would pick off the prominent black whatever. The black press, say, was kind of the local politics and all. They were very difficult kind of things— standards. There weren't any standards that fit all of them.

But you're talking about conventions. I covered all the conventions, but it's so long ago, [laughs] I wouldn't remember one of them. [Laughter] My memory isn't good.

MN: I don't know. I, uh, I suppose I didn't have, uh, the usual contact that a lot of the, uh, other reporters we had, uh, would have. Uh, I was – after I went to, uh, Baltimore, I was only on the beat for about a year, and then I got moved into the office in one editor's job, one editor's position, or another.

So, uh, before that, uh, when I was in Memphis, uh, I knew quite a few of the guys. Uh, in covering stories, uh, it, it was, uh, somewhat different, because, uh, normally they would stay at some hotel or something, or some motel that would be sort of a central headquarters for a lot of them. Uh, we were not able to stay at those places. Uh, some of the, uh, guys, uh – we got along, uh, when we were working. Uh, I could answer some things for them sometimes. They could help me with things sometimes on, uh, meetings that, uh, I wasn't able to get to. Uh, but, by and large, uh, it, it was a professional relationship, I would call it. Uh, I didn't do a lot of hanging out with, uh, anybody, and particularly the first five years.

I spent a lot of time down in Mississippi, and, uh, you know, their papers were carrying things which were pretty much opposite to [laughs] what I was writing and what I was emphasizing. Uh, they were emphasizing something else. And, uh, frankly, you didn't know who was who. [Laughs] And, uh, there was no need to be, you know, blabbing a lot with people

you didn't, uh, know who they were or what they were writing or, you know, what was going on. So, uh, I didn't really go out of my way to, uh, try to have a great social relationship with them.

JM: Let's take a little break.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: We're back.

JM: Okay, we're back after a little break. We're just going to finish up. Um, Mr. Newson and Mr. Booker, I want to, um, I want to ask for your thoughts about, um, being print reporters in an era when television came on to really do so much to impact [1:25:00] the way that the American public at large reacted to the civil rights story. And also, um – well, let me just open with that, any thoughts or reflections you might have on that question.

MN: Well, I think when the, uh, white press really, uh, became involved in covering the, uh, civil rights story as a movement, uh, nothing greater could have happened. Uh, they had the, uh, TV networks, and, uh, that was just, uh, invaluable. Uh, they would, uh, show how people were being treated. Uh, they did some great interviews. But, uh, I always had the feeling that Americans as a whole, uh, although they were not, uh, really anxious to bring about – get – see the changes take place that were taking place, uh, deep down, uh, there was sort of a feeling in America that justice was important and treating people a certain way was important.

And, uh, when those screens were showing people being beaten, uh, forced down by hoses, and trampled over by horses, uh, I think it had, uh, a great impact, and it was something that the black press could not do at the time. And, uh, those, uh, pictures, uh, and some of the coverage, too, uh, showed a great effort to, uh, get people thinking a different way, and I think it was very successful. Uh, I don't think the movement would have been, uh, able to do the things

it did at the speed that it was done, uh, without those, uh, images. And, uh, they were just, uh, greatly important, uh, to moving things to where it is now.

JM: Yeah.

MN: The media as a whole have been, uh, quite helpful. I still have some questions sometimes about some of the coverage, but, uh, I won't get into that. It's a long story, but I'll tell you one example is the, uh, the, uh, story involving, uh, the professor up at Harvard [Professor Henry Louis Gates Jr.] and the, uh, the way it was treated. Uh, it was a disorderly conduct thing that would not have stood up in any court in this country, because, uh, courts had said that, uh, American citizens can call policemen a name, you can yell at a policeman, you can demand to see his ID. And that's all that the sergeant, uh, charged him with.

Uh, the press told us, the media told us in great details that the black officer at the scene was a hundred percent behind the sergeant, that, uh, his commander said he was just doing what he was trained to do. But nobody was emphasizing in the mainstream media that this was such a *bad* arrest, that it wouldn't hold up in *any* court, *anywhere*. I mean, for *decades*, these rulings had been made, quite obviously. And, uh, the mainstream press didn't do the job on it that a lot of blogs were doing, uh, that a lot of cable stations were doing. And, uh, you know, I'm talking about the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. They weren't telling people that this was a case that would not stand up in any court. Most of them didn't even tell you why the case was dropped. [Laughs] They just said that it was dropped and that the charges were dropped. But, you know, it's – the media have done a great job, but, uh, from time to time, uh, you see coverage that, uh, is a little bit suspect.

JM: Yeah. That was the Professor Gates, um, incident in 2009, I believe, yeah.

MN: Yeah, right. Henry Louis Gates.

JM: Exactly. He's at Harvard, yeah.

MN: Henry Louis Gates.

JM: Uh, Mr. Booker, final question: [1:30:00] I know in '68, following the assassination of, um, of Robert Kennedy, that, um, you had had connections to the Kennedys and to Robert Kennedy and, I think, participated, um, in his funeral. In 1968, after Bobby Kennedy's death, does that –?

SB: Yeah.

JM: Do you have recollections of that experience?

SB: Well, I mean, it was a very sad occasion. I think he was the first official of that rank to be sensitive to racial matters and actually did something about it. Others would talk about it, not publically – to us. But he was very frank and did a lot of things. But then, he got, uh, killed, and it sort of wiped out – Lyndon [SB misspoke and intended Nixon] came along, completely different individual. He, uh, just – 1) he couldn't accept criticism, and, 2) he couldn't deal with a whole lot of blacks with different views. He had to be the boss of anything. And so, everything ended there, and our whole political structure seemed to disintegrate. And we're now trying to rebuild again, which we finally did when Obama came through, but then, it's still splintered on the white side. It's not a unity. So, I guess it's the way American will always be.

JM: Well, I hope that, um, I hope that we'll all have a chance to extend our conversation at some point, because it's been just wonderful to be with you both. Thank you so much for sitting down today.

SB: All right. Thank you.

JM: It's been a real privilege and honor. Thank you.

MN: It's a pleasure.

JB: Hang on a second, and I'll disconnect your microphones.

[Recording ends at 1:32:24]

END OF INTERVIEW