

Oscar Clark Carr, Jr. Oral History Interview—RFK, 5/6-7/1969
Administrative Information

Creator: Oscar Clark Carr, Jr.
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Biographical Note

Carr, a Mississippi political figure, was co-chairman of Mississippians for Robert Kennedy (1968) and a member of the Mississippi Democratic Executive Committee (1968-1971). In this interview, Carr discusses Democratic politics in Mississippi; segregation, racism and the civil rights movement; the Justice Department's involvement in desegregation and voter registration during the John F. Kennedy administration; and Robert F. Kennedy's 1968 presidential run, among other issues.

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Oscar Clark Carr, Jr.—RFK

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Oral History Interview

with

Oscar Clark Carr, Jr.

Also present: Billie Carr, Oscar Carr's wife

May 6 and 7, 1969

Clarksdale, Mississippi

By Dennis J. O'Brien

For the Robert F. Kennedy Oral History Program of the John F. Kennedy Library

O'BRIEN: Well, I think the obvious place to begin is, when did you first meet Robert Kennedy [Robert F. Kennedy]?

CARR: The first time I met Robert Kennedy personally was in his office when he was Attorney General of the United States. I had the opportunity to meet him because I had met Norbert Schlei [Norbert A. Schlei], who was assistant Attorney General at the time and who had come to Mississippi in regard to the Ole Miss [University of Mississippi] crisis and the Meredith [James Howard Meredith] riot. My wife and son and I were in Washington, looked up Norbert Schlei. He took us in to meet Robert Kennedy, and we had a very interesting meeting.

O'BRIEN: When was this, approximately, in time? Was this before the assassination of John Kennedy [John F. Kennedy] or afterwards?

[-1-]

CARR: I really can't recall. This was some six months or so after the riot at Ole Miss, I would say.

O'BRIEN: Then it must have been before the assassination.

CARR: Yes, it must have been.

O'BRIEN: Did you ever meet John Kennedy?

CARR: No, I never met John.... Yes, excuse me, I did meet John Kennedy. I met John Kennedy in Jackson, Mississippi, when he spoke there. He was being sponsored by Congressman Frank Smith [Frank E. Smith]. Frank Smith was one of those who nominated him for vice president, in the Democratic Convention, before he was nominated for president.

O'BRIEN: Well, this was way back then in '56, then?

CARR: Way back, yes.

O'BRIEN: What were your impressions of him?

CARR: I was very impressed with him. I must say frankly, though, that my involvement in the Democratic Party was strictly nominal, my involvement in the problems of Mississippi, and its confrontations with the rest of the nation were nominal until sometime after the Meredith crisis. I think that was the first time I was called upon to really reflect.

O'BRIEN: What.... At that time, at least.... Well, let's start again here. Can you describe what Democratic politics were like in Mississippi at that point, at the time of the crisis?

[-2-]

CARR: Well, at the time of the crisis and before, Mississippi was a total conformist society. The black man had no voice whatsoever in the governing of the state, although there had been a nominal number who for many years, being land owners and small businessmen, had voted traditionally. There were no mass movements to really get out the black vote. There was fear of economic coercion and reprisal, and most felt, you know, that the situation was such that peace was more valuable than freedom. It was only after that that the real activist civil rights groups got started to get out the black vote.

O'BRIEN: Well, how was it that the state of Mississippi elected a person like, well, Ross Barnett [Ross Robert Barnett] to the position of governor in 1959?

CARR: The same group of people, whether they be called the courthouse crowd or whatnot, had dominated Mississippi politics down through the years, the Bilbo [Theodore Bilbo]-Vardaman [James Kimble Varadaman]-Barnett philosophy. Every time there's any confrontation whatsoever, any involvement with pressure from an

outside, federal government, the sentiment and emotion rises to the surface and even becomes stronger. In the past we have had some good governors. For instance, J.P. Coleman would be considered a moderate. But every time there is a real confrontation political situation, the man who can get to the right of the other candidate always wins, because the racial issue has been and is still the dominant issue in Mississippi politics.

[-3 -]

O'BRIEN: Did the desire or did the political efforts to institutionalize segregation actually become more of an effort or more personified in the late fifties than it had been before? In other words, what's the impact of the rise of the Citizens Councils, the so-called Citizens Councils, in the fifties?

CARR: Well, the first impact that I can recall that really was brought to the attention of anybody was the 1954 Supreme Court decision. When this occurred, this was the impetus for a new kickoff of the White Citizens Council and a rebirth of the Klu Klux Klan. The organizations became more active, although under the surface these people had always remained the same. It was after 1954 that we found that the "separate but equal" philosophy would not prevail, that these people felt that they would have to handle it by taking the law into their own hands, and the law really meant Mississippi politics.

O'BRIEN: Did you get any insights into groups of people or groups where you were functioning at that time, and just how the Citizens Council organized at the local level? Were the people that went into this basically all Klan people?

CARR: No. Most of the politicians, most of the political power structure, were actually members of the Citizens Council; if not, emotionally they sided with them. I went to the first meeting of the White Citizens Council in this country, and I was appalled at the mass hysteria. As I recall, Judge Brady [Thomas P. Brady] made the kickoff speech. A lifelong friend of mine and a fellow football player, Robert Patterson, was the first executive secretary. He's a Clarksdale boy. He's a fine, moral individual, but when it comes to a discussion of black and white, it always degenerates as far as he is concerned to a mongrelization of the races. He's a total separatist. And he says that he will devote his life to seeing that the races stay separate in the state of Mississippi and in the South so long as he's able to prevail.

[-4 -]

I was amazed at the hysteria, and I was shocked at the time, which was even a shock to me that I was shocked at the time, because before this, I must admit that black men were considered second-class citizens. Even though there were friendships, black and white, they never had a position of equality, and it was never questioned. But times have changed very rapidly since that time.

O'BRIEN: Has the influence of the Citizens Councils remained the same or has it declined any since the late fifties?

CARR: It's declined substantially. As a matter of fact, in this section of the state it's not the "thing to do" now, to be a member of the White Citizens Council. It even has a taint on the name. It's gone through a transition period where they have other groups—in this community for a while it was known as the Committee of Twelve—who were to see that things stayed "as they should stay" (in quotes) after the White Citizens Council lost its glamour.

O'BRIEN: How would a group like this work, I mean, to see that things stayed "the way that they should" stay?

CARR: These men would meet before every political election, would see that the people of their choice would enter the political arena, would use economic coercion where possible, general persuasion where possible, and scare tactics where possible with certain members of the white community that might not agree with them, and might tend to be more or less apathetic toward the changes that might occur. It's an amazing thing that, as a rule, this is enough to prevail.

[-5 -]

O'BRIEN: Have you ever been subject to any of these pressures?

CARR: None whatsoever. No one has ever tried to pressure me. In recent years, of course, I've been so outspoken that I don't feel that they would attempt to pressure me. I think it's a strange thing sociologically, that I take as strong a stand as I do in the community and have never had a personal confrontation. Of course, one reason for this is that I am part of the Establishment: I cannot be economically coerced; I'm a fifth generation Mississippian; I'm a Mississippi Delta plantation owner; I'm chairman of a bank. And strangely enough, I'm trying to effect change and bring Mississippi into the 20th century as fast as anybody in the state.*

O'BRIEN: How are they able to, let's say, influence a person like Senator Eastland [James O. Eastland] or Senator Stennis [John C. Stennis]?

CARR: Well, Senator Eastland and Senator Stennis are only extensions of the electorate, and they respond to the electorate. I think it's very significant that with all the efforts of the Republican Party in Mississippi in the last presidential election, 1968, and all the efforts of our group, which were the loyalist

* At the annual meeting of the First National Bank of Clarksdale in January, 1970, the office of Chairman of the Board was abolished to remove me as chairman. They could not get anyone to run against me, so they abolished the office! Majority of the Board felt my "progressive image" would hurt and was hurting the banks. Interesting, also, that in 1969, of the three banks in town ours was the only one with increase in deposits!

Democrats who went to Chicago and unseated the regular Democrats because they did not espouse the philosophy of the Democratic Party, it's very significant that Mississippi still voted 63 percent for George Wallace [George C. Wallace]. And this is the electorate to which the Stennises and the Eastlands respond, and when it changes, they will change.

[-6-]

O'BRIEN: How does the Citizens Council—do they serve some kind of an educative function of this electorate? How do they get at the people, and in turn get at.... Have you ever seen any evidence of how they might get at a political leader, like a governor or a United States senator?

CARR: I've never seen any evidence of how they get at him. But the money is plentiful. They are constantly badgering them to respond to their wishes. And, frankly, they speak for a large, large percent of the white electorate, which is still in control.

O'BRIEN: Did Governor Barnett have a peculiar relationship to the Citizens Council that you could see?

CARR: Oh, yes. Governor Barnett addressed the mass meeting of the Citizens Council at all their rallies. He was a very strong supporter of the White Citizens Council.

O'BRIEN: Well, as a person that was active in public affairs, not necessarily politics but public affairs, in the period of the Kennedy Administration, how would you assess the influence of a group like this on the, let's say, people who you function with in a business way, the people, for example, around your bank, in the community of Clarksdale? Could you see any visible influence of these people in swaying attitudes, of people like yourself, that were community leaders? How about the people that you sat in the bank with, and the board of directors?

[-7-]

CARR: Well, the board of directors of our bank.... I was the instigator of this bank; I was the one that lead the charge to get the charter some five years ago. On our board—this is a business proposition—we pick seventeen members, and we purposely pick this group to represent the entire segment of the white community. Some of them feel like I feel. Some of them are or have been ardent members of the Citizens Council. We function as a board of directors of the bank, fully realizing that there's a wide spectrum of political philosophy in the group. But we function as a unit on the bank board. And when there are financial opportunities, or economic gains, or bank progress that can be effected, we send those who are most effective to go and call on those potential customers.

O'BRIEN: Going through some of the things that happened in the early sixties and

leading on up to the Oxford crisis, how did you react to, or can you recall how you felt about things like the Freedom Rides?

[-8-]

CARR: Well, the Freedom Rides were sort of a shock to me at that time. I was not involved. I had not been exposed to the national problems. I had never been confronted face to face. And I was sort of in limbo and subject to this conformity and apathy like everybody else. I'm a sort of a late arrival, if you might call it that. I guess my first real reflection occurred at the time of the Meredith riot.

O'BRIEN: Did you feel like things like the Freedom Rides were an intrusion on the sovereignty of Mississippi at that point?

CARR: Not so much that. I thought that there were better ways to effect change. Of course, I think history has proved me wrong. But at the time it was just a disturbance of the peaceful society. At that particular time, certainly not today, but at that particular time, I was not that concerned personally or involved in eradicating the injustices that are so prevalent.

O'BRIEN: How about the involvement of the Justice Department in voter registration in Mississippi?

CARR: Well, by the time the Justice Department got involved in voter registration I was beginning to side with them. I was a great admirer, and am a greater admirer, of John Doar [John M. Doar]. I was very concerned at that time and supported this involvement of the Justice Department.

O'BRIEN: You mentioned some time ago an encounter with Norb Schlei. How did that happen to come about?

[-9-]

CARR: Norb Schlei and Nick Katzenbach [Nicholas deB. Katzenbach] were on campus at Ole Miss during the crisis. As I recall, Norb Schlei's wife came to visit and since he was *persona non grata* in Oxford, and Oxford being only sixty miles away, an old Yale friend of Norb's brought Norb and his wife over to Clarksdale to entertain them for the evening, called me and I invited them out to the house after dinner. Following this occasion a long friendship grew between Norb and my wife and myself, and it's grown until this time. I gained an insight into the problems as seen from a man attempting to serve in the Justice Department that I had not been able to see before I had this long conversation with Norb. Later I saw him in Washington on several occasions and was even more enlightened.

O'BRIEN: What did you talk about that night? Was there a full range of subjects, or was

there anything in particular that you remember in the conversation you had with him?

CARR: I can't remember the confrontation I had, but I remember that we did confront one another. And I think this is one of the ways that we effect change. He put the questions to me that I could not legally and morally defend and pretty soon I was on his team.

O'BRIEN: What kind of a person is he?

[-10-]

CARR: Charming, educated, motivated, and his education at Yale Law School stood out. His dedication to John Kennedy and Robert Kennedy stood out. This was most, most impressive, this dedication.

O'BRIEN: Did your involvement in Democratic politics in the state really begin here at this point?

CARR: No, no. It did not begin at that time at all. My involvement in Democratic politics in the state only began in the last two or three years, as people like Hodding Carter III, Charles Evers, Aaron Henry [Aaron E. Henry], and I began to see the hypocrisy of the group that called themselves the Mississippi Democratic Party, who were nothing more than an extension of the old third party syndrome, or one party syndrome, of the Old South. And my philosophy is that if the South is ever to rise politically, it must have a viable two party system. And in order to effect this, not only are we going to have to have active growth and progress and efforts by members of the Republican and Democratic Party, but both the parties are going to have to zero in on the third party syndrome and destroy it.

O'BRIEN: After your encounter with Schlei, did you then begin to move into Democratic politics on your own? Was there any attempt on the part of Washington people to involve you in politics after that and prior to the Robert Kennedy campaign?

[-11-]

CARR: No. No. My first real involvement from Washington down to this level came with the Robert Kennedy campaign. I was serving on two national committees of the Episcopal Church. I was involved in seminars in New York City, in Chicago, on such subjects as world hunger and population explosion and human relations councils. The problems that confront not only the South but the nation and the world stood out like a sore thumb. And this gradually led to the fact that we needed to get involved in politics. I've served as president of the Delta Council, for instance, which is a prestigious organization that covers eighteen counties of the delta. I've served as president of the

Coahoma County Chamber of Commerce. I've been very active in my church, serving in just about every capacity, including president of the Episcopal Laymen of Mississippi. And I'm firmly convinced that there're not but two things that really are going to change the way things are: that's the vote and the dollar bill. And so this calls for an involvement in politics.

O'BRIEN: How does the Episcopal Church, you know, throughout the sixties in Mississippi stack up? Have they take a generally moderate view or a liberal view on race?

CARR: The Episcopal Church in Mississippi is just an extension of the white community and the affluent group. It's been said that it's the largest statewide body that's still segregated in the state. This is not the desire of the Bishop or of most of the clergy, but after all, you know, they can be coerced, too. They're on the chopping block. Although we are not a Congregational church, we effectively serve as a Congregational church, and if the minister gets in the pulpit and preaches something that the congregation does not agree with, they all adopt the messianic complex immediately and fire the minister. But my connections with the Episcopal Church at the national level are really what motivated me, and, as you know, they are more concerned all the time with social concerns.

[-12-]

O'BRIEN: Right. In this political involvement you're becoming involved in, in the period after Oxford, Mississippi, did you have any other encounters, well, between 1966 and '63 or the time you visited Robert Kennedy in Washington, did you have any other encounters with Administration people or with Democrats at the national level?

CARR: I was with Robert Kennedy several times. I'm trying to recall. I was with him when the subcommittee headed by Joe Clark [Joseph S. Clark] came to Mississippi. I think that was in '67. I had dinner with him in Jackson, and I toured the Mississippi Delta with him the following day. I was most impressed with Senator Kennedy's approach and with the poverty that I saw on the tour, even though I live here and should be more conversant with it anyway. But I was most impressed, and most impressed with his empathy.

O'BRIEN: Do you remember anything in particular that he discussed with you in those times?

CARR: No. It was very much of a whirlwind tour. At dinner that night he impressed me as being a very shy man, we ate a table where there were only eight of us at the table. He continually asked questions. He was shy in personal conversation. But we invited a group of people in after dinner, I think some forty people, and he addressed twenty of them in one room and Joe Clark addressed twenty in the other room. And the minute Senator Kennedy began to speak on the subject in which he was so involved

to the twenty people, his image and his aura completely changed, and the confidence that he exuded was paramount in contrast to the shy conversation on a man-to-man basis.

[-13-]

I forgot to mention that I also was with Senator Kennedy, not personally, but I went to the University of Mississippi when he made the speech on the campus. And this was one of the most impressive receptions that I have ever seen in the state. He came there *persona non grata*, or so one would think from reading the press, and I have never seen a politician of any ilk, stature, office at any time in the state more wildly acclaimed and received than he was following his speech that day. That was the day, if you recall, that he really answered the questions about the deal with Ross Barnett. And one of the questions that the students asked him after he finished his speech and after he finished his questions was, "Do you think, Senator Kennedy, in retrospect, that anything could have been done that would have prevented the deaths and the riot on the campus?" And he gave that great answer when he said, "Even though we have reflected on this for many, many hours over many, many weeks and months, the answer has to be no, because unless we had declared martial law there would have been no other method that we could have used. And who was I, as Attorney General of the United States, or my brother, as President of the United States to doubt the word of the Governor of the great, sovereign state of Mississippi, because basically I believe in states rights." And when he said this, it brought down the house.

O'BRIEN: Was he pleased with the reception he got at Oxford?

CARR: He was tremendously pleased. The students gathered around him after he finished speaking and asked him questions and just wanted to touch him. And I'm sure he would have been there much longer had he not had to leave on his plane for the University of Alabama, where, I understand, he was equally well received.

O'BRIEN: Did you have any contact in those years with his aides, anyone close to him?

CARR: Peter Edelman [Peter B. Edelman]. I had contact with Peter in Jackson and on the tour. I can't recall any other aide of the Senator's office that I was in contact with.

O'BRIEN: At this time, then, basically your contacts were I matter of friendship more than anything else?

CARR: Right.

[-14-]

O'BRIEN: Anyone ever seek you out for advice on.... [Interruption] You were following the senatorial career of Robert Kennedy at this point?

CARR: Yes, with outside interest. I was an admirer of Senator Kennedy's, never realizing that he would actually get into the race. It was sort of a surprise to me.

O'BRIEN: Just out of curiosity, backtracking a little bit, what did you do in the election of 1964?

CARR: I was a member of the President's Club and voted for Lyndon Johnson [Lyndon B. Johnson]. And it's an interesting thing how this happened: LeRoy Percy, who's a member of the famous Percy family of Greenville, Mississippi, and a person who feels as I do, called me one day and said, "Oscar, we've got to get a group of men that will support the Democratic ticket. We know that Mississippi is going strongly for Goldwater [Barry M. Goldwater]. But this madness is not going to last forever. A Democrat is going to be elected. We've got to let Washington know, and certainly the Department of Agriculture know, that everybody in Mississippi is not on the Goldwater bandwagon. I'd like a contribution." I said, "How much do you need, LeRoy?" And he said, "A thousand dollars. We want to get twenty-five members for the President's Club." I was a bit taken aback. But to make a long story short, I sent the check, which, being a member of the President's Club entitled us to all sorts of tickets and things, you know, to the Inauguration. And my wife Billie and I went to the Inauguration and had a ball. I imagine this turned us on a bit more. So we were off and running with involvement in the Democratic Party.

O'BRIEN: As a member of the President's Club, were you called on to perform any other, functions?

[-15-]

CARR: No. And this was one of my great, bitter complaints. With a group of twenty-five men in Mississippi who had this allegiance to Lyndon Johnson and to the Administration, I feel that Lyndon Johnson could have done a lot for us, and we could have done a lot for him, had he just invited the President's Club from Mississippi to come over to the ranch for an afternoon or something of this sort, allow us to come back to Mississippi and issue our own press statement saying that the President had called to show his concern for progress or lack of progress in Mississippi, and that we were appreciative of his concern, that we would try to help effect some of the changes that needed to be brought about. But to my knowledge, the President's Club of Mississippi, once they'd given their thousand dollars each were never contacted in any official manner whatsoever. And I attribute this to the fact that Senator Eastland and Senator Stennis have chairmanships of powerful committees, and that when the balance scale was weighed, that was the side of the scale to which President Johnson preferred to defer.

O'BRIEN: Of those people that were in the President's Club—did he get all twenty-five?

CARR: Yes. I think a few more.

O'BRIEN: And more. In these twenty-five people, how would you describe them? Were they in a sense a new kind of Democrat, like yourself, that were coming into things? In other words, have many of them followed and gone down the same road that you have?

[-16-]

CARR: No. I would say that probably 30 or 40 percent were people like myself, and the rest were old-line politicians who were political opportunists and realists, pragmatists, and also realized that a Democratic administration would be in Washington.

O'BRIEN: Did any of them in any visible way benefit from their associations with the President's Club?

CARR: None whatsoever that I know of.

O'BRIEN: We were talking a little while ago about your suggesting Senator Eastland's control for the state. Would you care to go into that a little bit, and describe how he does maintain control or influence over some of the other political figures in the state?

CARR: I would say unquestionably that Senator Eastland is the most powerful political figure in Mississippi and has been such for two decades. It's sort of a one party system that's carried over from the old traditions. He's never been challenged at a state level by anybody of any substance, really. Carroll Gartin, the ex-Lieutenant Governor of the state, ran against him once, and got beat by the powerful board of supervisors' courthouse crowd group that support those in office. I can't really say where his power comes from. I don't really think that the patronage is that powerful. It's just an image situation and the street corner conversation is, "Well, you know how it is. We haven't got much left in the South, and we don't want to lose our seniority."

O'BRIEN: You had some contacts with Senator Kennedy through—I'm trying to think of his name—the gentleman in... Russell, is it Russell? No, that isn't it.

[-17-]

CARR: Bill Henry.

O'BRIEN: Henry, right, right!

CARR: Bill Henry, E. William Henry from Memphis, Tennessee, is a lifelong friend, and was appointed chairman of the FCC [Federal Communications

Commission] by John Kennedy. And I've had many frustrating nights crying on Bill Henry's shoulder about how, how, how do we politically effect change in Mississippi. And, of course, he was a close friend of the Kennedy families and the Kennedy Administration. We discussed this at length but the only way we could possibly have come up with some answers would have been for a man like Robert Kennedy to be elected President of the United States. And then I feel that we could have effected some real changes in Mississippi.

O'BRIEN: Were you telling him this in 1966?

CARR: Telling Henry this?

O'BRIEN: Yes.

CARR: Certainly was, every opportunity.

O'BRIEN: Were you telling Kennedy this, or anyone else in the Kennedy...

CARR: I was not close enough to Kennedy to tell Kennedy. I was telling Henry and those around him. I was telling Lou Martin [Louis E. Martin] with the DNC [Democratic National Committee]. I was telling everybody I could. And the answer they always give is, "Go back and do it yourself on your own home ground. After all, this is your battle." And, of course, this is true.

[-18-]

O'BRIEN: You were becoming increasingly involved in Democratic politics in these years?

CARR: At least mentally.

O'BRIEN: Did you have any encounters with people in the Democratic establishment in the state at that point?

CARR: No, not really.

O'BRIEN: Had you been called on, particularly as a contributor, to the Democratic Party in the years before...

CARR: At state level?

O'BRIEN: ...1964, and your involvement in the President's Club? Right, at state level.

CARR: No. I was asked to be chairman of Frank Smith's campaign when the state was redistricted. He was defeated by Jamie Whitten [Jamie W. Whitten]. I

was asked to be chairman of his campaign. But at the time I declined because I was president of the Delta Council, and both Whitten and Smith represented part of our district. I felt that it would not be a wise political campaign at that particular time.

[-19-]

O'BRIEN: What kind of a person is Frank Smith?

CARR: I'm a great, great, great admirer of Frank Smith's. He's one of the few politicians that we have had, of those that held political office, in the past fifteen or twenty years in Mississippi that had the vision to recognize that we did have to change and to become a viable member of the other states of the American political system. And of course, this led to his downfall.

O'BRIEN: Is he generally liked in Mississippi politics now?

CARR: Well, of course, he's considered a liberal, and liberal is a bad word with the "ins" in the Mississippi political establishment.

O'BRIEN: When did you sense that Robert Kennedy had a strong possibility of being a candidate?

CARR: Well, I just gathered that he had a strong possibility when I saw him in person and read the newspapers. The charisma was definitely there. And when I saw a man like Robert Kennedy come to the University of Mississippi and turn those students on like he did, there was no question that he could do it nationally. If he could do it at the University of Mississippi, he could do it anywhere.

O'BRIEN: Did you follow the twist and turns, though, about the announcement of his candidacy? When did you sense, let's say in 1968, that he was really going to be a candidate, he was actually going to step in?

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CARR: Well, I was a little surprised, after McCarthy [Eugene J. McCarthy] entered, when Robert Kennedy stepped in. I fully identified with and understood the reason that he could not do it first. And I was most, most impressed with his presentation, which I watched on television, when he announced his candidacy. And I was on his team from that minute on.

O'BRIEN: Did you contact him or did someone contact you prior to that?

CARR: No, I did not contact him.

MRS.CARR: You sent him a telegram.

CARR: Yes, I believe I did send him a telegram congratulating him on his candidacy and pledging my support, which would have been, I'm sure, like an anonymous telegram in the myriad of telegrams he received. My first contact came when Hodding Carter from Greenville called me and said that Ted McLaughlin [Edward F. McLaughlin, Jr.], the Southeastern coordinator from the Kennedy campaign headquarters, was looking for me, and he was in Jackson and wanted to see me.

O'BRIEN: Had you ever met Ted before?

CARR: No. Never heard his name.

O'BRIEN: What kind of a person is he?

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CARR: Well, Ted graduated from Lawrenceville School and the University of North Carolina. He was a wrestling champion there. He's very persistent and he said, "We've looked over the field and we want you to be co-chairman with Charles Evers for Kennedy's campaign. It was a difficult thing to give him no for an answer. Evers accepted the co-chairmanship. This was a front edge move that came out of the Kennedy campaign headquarters to get a black man and a white man to be co-chairman of a statewide campaign in Mississippi, something completely unheard of, and frankly, I was hesitant about accepting the job. I knew it was on the front edge and I knew what it would involve, and I thought about it for ten days before I said yes.

O'BRIEN: Had you made any other, well, not necessarily commitments, but had you made any other efforts in behalf of other candidates?

CARR: I had not made any other efforts. But down through the months preceding this I had had close contact with Secretary of Agriculture Orville Freeman [Orville L. Freeman], who I admire very greatly. Secretary Freeman had had a dinner aboard the presidential yacht, the USS Sequoia, for my wife, myself, my brother, and his wife. All of us had been helpful in Secretary Freeman's tour of Mississippi. This was a most, most enjoyable occasion in Washington. I knew that Secretary Freeman had supported openly the candidacy of Vice President Humphrey [Hubert H. Humphrey]. I had been asked to introduce Vice President Humphrey when he made his visit to the University of Mississippi at Oxford. My brother supported Orville Freeman and Vice President Humphrey. But I never hesitated to support Kennedy. It was not the question of my support for Kennedy; the real question was whether or not I would accept the co-chairmanship with Charles Evers.

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O'BRIEN: When Ted applied the persuasion to you—to use that, those terms—do you recall anything of the conversations?

CARR: Well, it was interesting, the people that called. I've forgotten who I talked to. I think Frank Mankiewicz [Frank F. Mankiewicz] called. I distinctly remember that we were at the Waldorf in New York at a national church meeting that lasted some two or three days—and this was in the ten day interim period—and the phone rang in the room one night, and it was Ted Kennedy [Edward M. Kennedy] calling from Washington. He said, "We certainly do want you to accept this job." I said, "Senator, I'd like to ask you a question. Is this the ruthless, arm twisting politics that I read so much about in *Time* and *Newsweek*?" He said, "Oscar, this is it."

O'BRIEN: Can you expand on some of your growing contacts with people in the Kennedy campaign at the national level? Of course, there was Ted McLaughlin. How about other people in the campaign? Did you encounter any?

CARR: Not really. You see, we opened our campaign efforts with a meeting in Jackson in the latter part of May. It was very surprising the number of telephone calls and letters. People were really coming out from under the rocks. We thought that this would be a most, most difficult campaign, and of course, it would have. But I was surprised at members of the academic community and the youth groups and all who had even formed campus groups for Robert Kennedy before our announcement. We coalesced these groups at a meeting in Jackson and were all set to really get the campaign kicked off when, of course, the tragedy occurred. I recall that on the morning of June 5th we were having the formal opening of our office, coincidentally, across from the Governor's Mansion in Jackson, when I received a call from the UPI [United Press international] saying that the Senator had been shot, and did I have a statement.

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O'BRIEN: Did anyone else come through Mississippi from the Robert Kennedy staff or associated with the campaign, outside of Ted McLaughlin?

CARR: Terrell Glenn [Terrell L. Glenn] from South Carolina made a talk in the state to the Young Democrats. He had been a United States District Attorney under Robert Kennedy. After that time, of course, during our democratic challenge there were others that came. Frank Mankiewicz....

Mrs. CARR: You mean in August?

CARR: Yes. I can't recall. We really didn't have enough time before, you see. It didn't last long enough. It was not but about a two or three week period there between the time we got started and the assassination.

O'BRIEN: Had you known Charles Evers before this?

CARR: I had met Charles Evers a couple of times, but I had not known him intimately. The longest visit I had with Charles, really, up to this, time was the day that he and I made the press conference announcement in Jackson. I'm most impressed with Charles Evers. Charles Evers and Aaron Henry and I are all about the same age. I think it's a real phenomenon that two black leaders such as Charles and Aaron could come out of the past in Mississippi as they have. They are tremendous men.

O'BRIEN: What influence do you think they had on blacks for Robert Kennedy? Do you think Robert Kennedy had a good deal of popularity among Negroes in Mississippi?

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CARR: I think the Kennedy name and the Kennedy charisma would have turned out a black vote in Mississippi for Kennedy like had never turned out before. I don't think there's any other name in the history of American politics that could have turned them on like the Kennedy name.

O'BRIEN: Let's go into some of your organization, some of the details about your organization, this tentative organization you were putting together for Kennedy.

CARR: Well, you've got to realize that we were right at the beginning. Dan Cupit [Danny E. Cupit], who is now the president of the Young Democrats in Mississippi, had tremendous setups on the university campuses. I don't think there's any question that this would have been a strong, strong ally in the campaign. The black community, there was no question that we would have had unprecedented support. I trust you know that in the white community it would have taken real efforts to get any significant support. However, we planned to carry the black and white co-chairmen concept down through the entire state. We would have black and white co-chairmen, Evers and Carr, black and white co-chairmen at every congressional district level, and black and white co-chairmen at every county level. This is a new concept in politics but I predict that in the future this will be a viable way to get the black and white communities working together in one political campaign.

O'BRIEN: You mean Mississippi or...

[-25-]

CARR: Mississippi and other states in the South. The money would have been a job. I think we could have raised enough money to put on an effective campaign. There was no money from outside. We were in such a hurry to open the campaign offices that I asked Ted McLaughlin if he could get us a check sent down from Kennedy headquarters in Washington, a loan which we would repay, in order to open the offices, put in the telephones, and do it on a day or two's notice, which he did. He sent a

check for fifteen hundred dollars. On the closing of the offices, this fifteen hundred dollars was repaid. I think that's really all I've got to say about the state organization.

O'BRIEN: Cupit was fairly effective?

CARR: Fairly effective, and he's going to become more and more involved himself. He's a student at the University of Mississippi Law School. We have a very active group among the young lawyers over there, and I think they're going to be a productive force.

O'BRIEN: How about total numbers? What would you guess your total strength was?

CARR: I could not say. It would all depend on the number of the blacks that would vote. I wouldn't say what we could have carried the state over Nixon [Richard M. Nixon]. I would not say. It would have all depended on what would have happened between then and November, and it would all be just conjecture. It was an uphill battle, as you can well imagine, a real uphill battle, a mountain climbing battle.

[-26-]

O'BRIEN: Right. Did you have any contact with other state groups or other groups at all?

CARR: No. No. I think its interesting to note, and I would like to make it a part of the record, the fact, though, that we attended the Kennedy funeral. We went to the mass in New York, and we were at Arlington [Arlington National Cemetery]. My wife and I flew to Washington, flew to New York on the Kennedy campaign plane, which was quite a shock—to see the bed still there, the typewriter facilities still there. It was a very depressing thing. But at that time, I met the chairmen from North Carolina, South Carolina, Florida, Alabama, and I can't recall what other states. But I have never in all my life in any other area of society, be it religious, civic, or otherwise, met as fine and as dedicated and as attractive a group of men as these men.

O'BRIEN: Well, how about afterwards, after the assassination?

CARR: Well, after the Kennedy assassination, we moved right into the battle of trying to get our delegation, a loyal group, loyal to the national Democratic Party, seated in Chicago. And as you by now know, we were successful. For the first time in American political history, a challenging group of delegates totally unseated the regular delegation. Our delegation was 50 percent black and 50 percent white. It included people like myself—and Hodding Carter and Aaron Henry were the co-chairmen of the delegation.

[-27-]

We went to Chicago for the Credentials Committee hearing, one of the most impressive events that I have ever attended in my life. There banked in the Conrad Hilton Hotel were the credentials delegates from the fifty states and five districts, a hundred and ten strong. Governor Hughes [Richard J. Hughes] of New Jersey was the chairman. He addressed our groups, our two groups, and said that this was the highest court of the Democratic Party, he knew emotions ran high, he hoped that after it was all over we could say we had our fair day in court, and he wanted to remind us that both sides could not win. I recall that in the rebuttal, answer, of Doug Wynn [Douglass C. Wynn], who was one of our lawyers, Doug Wynn said, "You have called us a rump delegation. You regulars have called us a rump delegation. You say that if we're seated, it will destroy the Mississippi Democratic Party. I would like to ask you in front of this Credentials Committee gathering, 'If we're a rump delegation, and if this is so important, where is the Governor, the titular head of the party? Where are the senators? Where are the congressmen from Mississippi? Where is the chairman of the regular delegation?'"

We won by a vote of eighty-six to nine. They did not even have enough votes for a minority battle on the floor. And two of the five men who went to appear for the regular delegation came over and joined our delegation as official observers as soon as we won. It was an unprecedented victory. We got half the vote in Alabama, half the vote in Florida, half the vote in Georgia, half the vote North Carolina, half the vote in Carolina. We lost Texas and Louisiana. We got both votes in Arkansas, both votes Tennessee, and every other vote in the United States that voted. So you see, it was not a sectional vote as far as us getting seated was concerned.

[-28-]

O'BRIEN: What were your impressions of Chicago and all of the things that have been written about it since?

CARR: Well, I need Norman Mailer [Norman K. Mailer] here to speak for me, I guess. [Laughter] As far as all the confrontation in Grant Park and in front of the Conrad Hilton, we were too busy at the amphitheater to see any of that. I had the repressive feeling, though, in the amphitheater that every vote that we took, whether it was time to adjourn or when a Credentials Committee report would be heard, was Establishment against the rest of the people. That was Daley [Richard J. Daley], Humphrey, and Johnson's group, more or less, against any challenge. I did not like that aspect of it. I think that it did not seem free. I think that added to the frustration of the delegations and some of the arguments that took place on the floor, especially between the New York, California, and the Wisconsin delegations and the rest of the people. Our delegation itself was entirely free. I think it's interesting to note, and I've forgotten whether it was Archibald MacLeish or who that said we were the most democratic delegation there. As I recall, we had nine votes for Humphrey, six votes for McCarthy, four votes for McGovern [George S. McGovern] area two votes for Channing Phillips [Channing E. Phillips], which I think is real democratic.

O'BRIEN: Yes. It certainly split well.

CARR: There was a significant effort to draft Ted Kennedy, which I think was real. I recall that one morning for breakfast Frank Mankiewicz and Charles Evers and I met for breakfast in the hotel in a private room. Frank Mankiewicz was trying to gather the number of delegates that could be lined up in the event that Ted Kennedy would say yes. If you recall, Daley refused to deliver the Illinois votes and gave us a day to see whether this was a viable situation or not. I think it's interesting to point out, too—Ted Kennedy, of course, did not accept the draft to run, and I concur with that also—but I think it's significant that Mississippi, had Robert

[-29-]

Kennedy lived or Ted Kennedy been drafted, could have delivered 90 percent of delegate strength on the first ballot as far as their candidacy would have been concerned. I think this is a strange paradox in the light of all that had gone before.

O'BRIEN: Right. When did you first meet Ted Kennedy?

CARR: I've never met Ted Kennedy.

O'BRIEN: Oh, you haven't.

CARR: I've talked to him on the telephone, and I plan to see him the last of this month, as a matter of fact. I'm going to Washington. So I think this is also strange, that I've never met Ted Kennedy.

O'BRIEN: Have you met any of his immediate staff?

CARR: Yes. I know Dun Gifford [K. Dun Gifford], who works in the office. I was chairman of the Kennedy dinner committee in Mississippi. The Kennedy dinner to make up the deficit in the Kennedy campaign was held back in January. I had a prior speaking engagement to address the Episcopal Diocese of Tennessee in their annual convention in Memphis, and I could not back out on this acceptance. And so my wife and son from prep school went to the Kennedy dinner and went out to Ted and Joan Kennedy's [Joan Bennett Kennedy] and danced till 3:30 in the morning. But I have not met Senator Ted Kennedy yet.

O'BRIEN: Well, we're at the end of questions here, and I realize there're just tremendous gaps in what we've... Well, in light of the personal effect of the Kennedys on Mississippi politics and involvement in Mississippi politics from the Oxford crisis on, what do you see in the way of a future?

[-30-]

CARR: Well, of course, I guess that could be divided into two categories: the future

politics in Mississippi as it regards or is affected by Kennedy, and just the future of Mississippi politics. Needless to say, Ted Kennedy is today the most popular of the three Kennedy brothers in Mississippi. Not that he stands for anything different, but just that he has not been in a position of confrontation politics with Mississippi yet. I do think, though, that his charm and personality and good looks—and if he were to come into the state, that he would be received with an acclaim surpassing any that has gone before. I do not fear for his safety or anything in Mississippi. Of course, there're always nuts, and I cannot speak for them. But I would not feel that his life or his body would be in danger in Mississippi any more so than they would be anywhere else. As far as Mississippi politics in the future is concerned, I just don't know.

I think it's interesting that—I was the Humphrey chairman for this county in the election with Nixon. I think it's indicative that Nixon got eighteen hundred votes roughly; George Wallace, thirty-five hundred; and Humphrey carried the county with fifty-three hundred votes, a clear plurality. The reason for this is because we have a large black percentage in the county. And we have a relatively educated electorate here even among the blacks. To get this...

[BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE 2]

[-31-]

CARR: And as I said—I don't know whether this got on the other tape—in this county we were able to carry the Humphrey campaign with fifty-three hundred votes roughly for Humphrey, thirty-five hundred for George Wallace, and eighteen hundred for Nixon. The job to build a Republican Party and a true Democratic Party in Mississippi is tremendous. At times in the light of the past it seems insurmountable. However, change is on an exponential curve in the rest of the world, and I presume it will eventually get here. Whether we will make the 20th century by the end of the century or not, I could not say. The problems that face Mississippi are economic, educational, and emotional. And the race problem is still the dominant problem. It is only when we can pull the educational and the economic problems into focus that we can handle this emotional problem of race. I estimate that this can be done sometime between the next four and ten years. We have seen it done in Tennessee, which is our neighbor to the north, and I would hope that in the deep, deep South we can do it as soon as possible. There's an old Chinese curse which says, "May he live in interesting times." These are interesting times. But people like myself and Hodding Carter and others do not regard it as a curse; we regard it as a challenge, as a responsibility, and as an opportunity. And we hope to effect change as fast as possible through the political media.

O'BRIEN: Okay. Can you think of anything else here in the way of happenings or events that took place or anything else that you think should go on here in the way of a footnote?

[-32-]

CARR: Would you be interested in the Walter Lord visit?

O'BRIEN: Yes. Yes. Yes. Lord's visit.

CARR: Walter Lord came down to write a book on Mississippi with the focal point being the Meredith riot. He contacted me to try to get him in contact with some people who were part of the group that had supported the Bilbos, the Vardamans, the Barnetts down through the years, the people that could allow such things to happen, that could keep these people in the forefront of Mississippi politics. I had an extraordinary contact through some close friends of mine who are from Calhoun County, Mississippi, where they export the (quote, end quote) "rednecks." These fellows were buddies of mine because they hunt deer with me on our private deer preserve. They keep the deer hounds during the year and come down and run them during the deer season.

I took Walter Lord over, set up a meeting, met them in the back room of the Belmont Cafe, some twelve men strong, to discuss this problem, the Meredith riot, the Mississippi emotional syndrome that has prevailed since 1860. And I opened the meeting by saying, "Gentlemen, this is a good friend of mine. He's not a CBS [Columbia Broadcasting System] or an NBC [National Broadcasting System] reporter. He's not a Communist. He's here to write a book, and he's going to tell the world how we get along in Mississippi. So I want you fellows to open up and tell him like you see it."

[-33-]

There was a long pause. Nobody spoke. I thought for a moment that I had lost my rapport with these people. Finally, an old man down at the end of the table spoke up and said, "I wants to be first." He says, "I ain't a native of Calhoun County, Mississippi, but I've lived here for thirty-six years, and both my granddaddies fit through all four years of the big war." He said, "I never did know one of my granddaddy, but I knew the other one and," he said, "he set me on my knee when I was a little shaver, and he said, 'son, I'm going to tell you two things, and I don't want you to ever forget neither one of them.'" And he said, "I believe 'em stronger today than my granddaddy did when he told me sixty-four year ago. He said, 'Son, first thing I'm going to tell you is a nigger ain't got a soul. He's like a pig, a chicken, a horse, a cat, a dog, or a mule. And the second thing is, a Republican is a sonofabitch.'"

I think it's interesting to note that in 1964, following this interview, Calhoun County voted for Goldwater and went Republican. It may be sometime in the next decade that they may come around to thinking that a Negro has got a soul. I think that's an interesting story, and this was recorded in Walter Lord's book, *The Past That Would Not Die*, which I highly recommend to anybody who has not read about Mississippi and would like to learn about the emotions here. This is the best book about Mississippi that's come off the press.

O'BRIEN: Do you think Oxford, Mississippi, though, has really begun some fundamental changes in the state, as far as politics?

[-34-]

CARR: Oxford?

O'BRIEN: Right, and the encounter there at Oxford.

CARR : Oh, I think the whole encounter made a lot of people think. The educational system in Mississippi is still not free. It's under the control of the board of trustees, who are politically appointed. The chancellors are not free; they have to answer to the board of trustees. The board of trustees have to answer financially to the appropriations of a legislature that's basically rural and which is basically uneducated. And it's sort of a bootstrap proposition. You know which comes first, the chicken or the egg? If it weren't for the outside pressures, we would have not made any progress whatsoever, I don't believe.

And one of the failures in the past has been the lack of cooperation between the true Democrat in Mississippi and the national organization. The national organization, which allows people to be seated as chairmen of committees because of their seniority, has never demanded that the Eastlands, and the Stennises, and the Whittens, and the Abernethys [Thomas G. Abernethy] support the Party. I say that if you try to carry water on both shoulders, you end up a water boy. And if you get in the middle of the road, you're going to get hit from both sides. So it's only a matter of time. We have got to have integrity as far as the Party is concerned. And if we could get the support from the national Democratic Party in Washington, D.C.—and we will work with them and we will lead from strength—we can effect some real change in Mississippi.

O'BRIEN: Thank you, Mr. Carr, for the interview this evening.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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