UF UNIVERSITY of FLORIDA

Samuel Proctor Oral History Program
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MFP-027A
Interviewee: Elmo Proctor
Interviewer: Dr. Paul Ortiz
Date: August 6, 2004

O: Mr. Proctor, could you begin by stating your full name and where you were born?

P: My name is Elmo Proctor, Jr., and I was born at Tula, Mississippi. However, my mother and father had disagreements and, at the age of two—that was in 1941—we moved to a little place south of . . . here in Indianola, called a little place called Inverness, Mississippi. We stayed at Inverness, Mississippi until I was twelve, and at that age, I moved to Indianola, Mississippi, where I'm currently living and has lived here basically all my life. I've never been out of the state of Mississippi more than ninety days at one time and, at that particular time, I was doing harvest work, like in Florida, Carolina, Wisconsin, picking fruits, vegetables, tobacco, and stuff like that. But I did that in off-season and one thing another. I attended high school and grade school here in Indianola. I finished high school in Gentry and, upon finishing high school—I finished high school in 1960—in [19]61, I started to work with a permanent job for a textile factory called Ludlow's. We did offer yarns and different types of yarn and a few synthetics at that particular time. But we, back in the early [19]60s—I like to think [19]62—voter registration started here in Indianola and I can recall trying to get to be a registered voter—the difficulties and everything that we had. We actually had policemen and things around the courthouse, halfway intimidating people for trying to get to vote. And, at that particular time, we had to interpret parts of the

Mississippi Constitution rather than interpret the United States Constitution as to what was right or wrong and certain amendments, articles and things of that particular constitution. We did take Mississippi history when I was in seventh grade, but we never really got up into the Mississippi Constitution, not like we did the United States Constitution, because . . . the United States Constitution takes primacy, basically, over any state constitution. It outweighs a state's constitution.

O: Mr. Proctor, when did you first—and you mention that you started to try to register to vote in 1962—when did you first begin to think about changing things?

P: To be perfectly earnest—and this might sound a little funny—but I thought of that at an early age. I started thinking about that when I was in the tenth grade at Gentry. And then, when I got to be in the eleventh grade and we started taking biology at that particular time, I . . . studied biology, botany, and zoology. And what I found was that blacks and whites, their only difference was the pigments of their skin, basically. I found that there were only four major blood types, and that if one needed blood and it was donated at a hospital, there was no telling as to which type blood one would get, whether it's from a black, Japanese, Mexican, or anybody else, so long as the blood and the type matched. I started to think like that because of some of the teachings, I guess, that I grew up with. I grew up with a lot of myth in my life. I was told by Mom, bless her heart—and she did the best that she could, because of circumstances that she didn't know

any better—she always would tell us things like, fear the doctor because the doctor was going to shoot you with the needle. Fear the policeman because he was going to lock you up. Fear Santa Claus because he was going to put some ashes in your eyes. And, above all, fear the white man, because he would kill you. In part, that may have been true. But I thought along the line that, hey, if you cut that white man, he's going to bleed the same type blood that I bleed if it is of his blood type, so he's really no different. It's just that his way of thinking and acting towards certain groups of people made him different. Not that he was no more superior—nor was he inferior, but neither was I. So I thought about, at that time, there should be something that people were able to do. I don't take credit for doing anything that was magnificent in any stretch of one's imagination. The process of trying to get things changed was a big wheel with many clocks on it. And I was not even a clock, I was simply a little chip that broke off of one of the clock. But, by working together to form the wheel that changes could be made. And, once the opportunity presented itself, I was not one who wanted to sit back and let all the weight fall on somebody else's shoulder. If there was any little thing that I might be able to do to contribute to helping my life and my family's life better, I classified myself as a model citizen. I registered for the Armed Forces when I became eighteen, and, in my opinion, if I was able to fight for the country and die for the country, I deserve certain rights and everything that all other

citizens of these United States deserved. And that motivated me, I guess, more than anything, in trying to see that we could help get things changed.

O: Mr. Proctor, when you were talking about your study of biology and zoology led you to begin to question things, but, looking at it from an early age, what was your first experience or what was your first awareness of segregation or Jim Crow or . . . ?

P: My real first awareness—and I can't think of the year it happened—was when this little ten-year-old kid came down from the North, Emmet Till. And there are rumors—and I don't have anything to substantiate the rumors, whether the rumors were true—that this young kind did a wolf whistle or something, and whites of Mississippi killed that little kid. Like, what in the world can a little kid do by whistling at a white woman or a person, period? The little kid may have not known anymore about what he was doing than I would have known at that age. It's not that he could have been making sexual advances toward the lady because, at that particular age, unless he was further advanced than I was at that age, basically knew nothing about sexual advances or what the word sex hardly even meant. And I thought that was so grossly wrong, and that started me to think, what's wrong with Mississippi? Is it that way across the country? And not knowing, going strictly by hearsay from people of different states and everything, Mississippi was far different. I know that, if a young white kid grew up to be sixteen or seventeen years old—and I was about that same age—that we was asked to call that kid mister. And I don't care how

old a black guy, that same kid would call him, boy, if he so felt. And I thought that was wrong. I guess from that time, I start to think about, there got to be a better way, there got to be something that can be done to make things a little bit more on a equal basis so far as human relations was concerned.

O: Mr. Proctor, when you started getting involved in movement activity, how would you organize or how would you encourage other people who might not have been as ready as you were? How would you try to get them involved, try to get them to register?

P: Well, I had an opportunity to—when I got registered, I had an opportunity to talk to several people. Simply by telling them that I did not, necessarily, have to be right, but if we were to ever move up the scale and become citizens as other people, that this was something that we needed to do. I told about the fact that I talked to people about the fact that, hey, we take oaths and things when we go down to the local board to register and vote, and we go to the Service. If we should happen to be killed in the Service, we are veterans like everybody else. And that, in order to have our voices heard, we were going to have to become like the other group that had these opportunities. And, without these opportunities, that we would never be able to make any kind of moves so far as bettering our condition.

O: When the counter—when you started registering, and then the repression or the reaction set in, what would people do to protect themselves from violence or from . . .

P: Well, in many a cases—and I don't knock education, because I think it's a vital part of human life; without it, you're not going to get very far—but, by the same token, in my mind, when we were trying to get registered to vote, if you talked to teachers about the same thing that you was trying to do, they were very reluctant. Now, these was our leading people. But there was a fear tactic going on and, in order to protect themselves, they just simply didn't participate. And a lot of our—well, one program in specifically that started here in this community was a Head Start system. A Head Start system started in this community by basically people that was not highly educated and was basically doing work for practically free. There was a statement made one time while we was harboring different things that are—hey, look. I'm not going to go out there and my head cut off because y'all can make anything happen and it benefits y'all, we going to get the same benefits, you know. But, I thought those were very negative statements for people that supposed to be leaders in the community to make, but they was actually made. They were fearful.

O: Fearful.

P: They were fearful.

O: Okay. So, who were the—Mr. Proctor, if those people were fearful, who were the majority of the participants in the movement here? What kind of people?

P: Sad to say, but truth nonetheless . . . younger blacks, older men, and, basically, women. Our menfolks was much more fearful than our ladies.

And . . . I've gone places where there would be four or five men and twenty-five or thirty ladies talking about the same thing. But the men, as a whole, was either very young, and I don't say, necessarily, didn't mind being hurt—I don't think anyone wants to get hurt. But there was an urge and a necessity thing going on, whereabouts these things needed to be done. There were other people and of other races that was coming in to help, to try and alleviate this problem that we was having here in Mississippi. Some of these people were being killed. And I says to myself, if other people think enough of my freedom to have some of the things which the constitution guarantees us to have in the state of Mississippi—if they're willing to come here and sacrifice their family life, risk their lives and being killed—and some were—that the least I could do was lend a helping hand and be supportive.

O: And so, it sounds like there were a lot of debates within the community among different people about whether or not to get involved, or . . . but you mentioned Head Start, and I'm interested in that because not as many people think about Head Start and connect it to the movement. I mean, we all know Head Start is very popular today; most people don't understand how it was started. Can you talk about that, about the early Head Start?

P: Well, Head Start gave a lot of people some type of relief from having to try and stay home all the time with the kids. And by Head Start moving in and taking some of that pressure off, you had a few more women that was able to actually go out and help support the family. It was basically costing

little or nothing for this to happen. So, economically, Head Start played a major role in helping a lot of people and the working parents economically, so they could get out and help do some of the things that was necessary in order to have a fairly decent life. And, by that same token, it not only gave them an avenue to try and help support the family, but it basically put that young child out there in somewhat of a learning environment at the same time, enabling these young people to get a little bit earlier start in life than a lot of us had the chances to take. By doing that, a lot of the young people became better students. And, one thing another like that, which was help to the young person in getting a start in life as well as to help the mother of those young people help earn a decent wage in order to help support that young care.

O: Mr. Proctor, how did the movement change Indianola? What kind of the changes were made? And what things didn't change?

P: Well, the movement—I guess it helped in many ways. I'm reminded of one particular instance that happened; see, once the movement started, there were several things within the movement. Like, when I worked at Ludlow—when we went to Ludlow, when I was at Ludlow, there were basically . . . the minority was whites that was working there, but through voter registration in the movement and everything, and federal guidelines, we actually formed a protest at Ludlow whereby it made things better there. It made people, as a whole, look at things from a different point of perspective. And mind you, now, it wasn't totally accepted. But there were

token changes made. There were drastic changes made at Ludlow because the four black women that were working there at that time was Lilly Harris, Dithola Brown, Miss Rosalie Louis, and I want to think that the other lady was named Viola Green. At any rate, she was a Mrs. Green. They did all the heavy work. They was pushing the heavy **bobbin trucks**. They were picking up the yarn, taking it to stations whereby it would be boxed, and stuff like that. But, having a fellow contract—at that particular time, we were making yarn and stuff for the federal Post Office. As a matter of fact, I think Ludlow probably had the only contract with the Post Office at that time. And, being an entity that was dealing directly with the federal government, shipping federal government merchandise, it was unconstitutional for them to discriminate because of sex, color, or creed. And, through Hershel Kaminsky, myself, and three or four other people, we was able to mount and succeed and get EOC to look into the situation and cause some big changes to be made at Ludlow. By the time I left there—I went there in [19]61, I left there in [19]65—by that time, there were several ladies who had gotten hired in decent jobs. And, upon happening, the company itself was not the happiest in the world for what had happened, because it was almost as if we forced them to hire labor that they had not intended. But, once they hired that labor, there was comments that made that we should have been doing this all along. Because they found out that they had black ladies out there was that were swifter, that was able to do the work just as good, and in some cases,

even better. The only avenue that, at that particular time, that hadn't opened up so much was supervisory jobs. Unfortunately, I got fired before that part takes place, but, before Ludlow finally closed and moved away, they were positions that even blacks was holding. And, at that particular time, there were separate restrooms, separate eating areas; but, before I left, all that had changed to whereby you had a choice. You could use either facilities to eat in. Either facility to use as your restroom. And that was a choice that people made. There was hostility, however. There was hostility. I can recall in one incident, I went to a restroom: when I walked in the restroom, a white guy slammed the door so hard on the stall that I was in that it actually came into the stall where I was. It didn't come off the hinge, but it came into the stall. We had a white guy throwing hot coffee at people and one thing another like that. But it all kind of panned out after eight or ten weeks, things started to kind of mellow a little bit. But it was tough going. It . . . you didn't know whether, when you walked off the lot, whether people was going to attack you. Some of the moments were fearful, a little bit. But then, that is some kind of price one pays for freedom or trying to obtain freedom. Fortunately, didn't anybody get seriously hurt. Didn't anybody get killed. But there have been people that died for trying to obtain freedom, and just to get a door slammed behind you or get harsh words said to you for that reason, it was all worth the while.

O: Mr. Proctor, what, thinking back on your activity in the movement, what do you hope will come out of the union and your participating in there?

P: Hmm. Awareness, awareness. Because, as much as the movement has done—and mind you, it's done a lot—the sad thing about it is, as much as it has done and as great as it has been, some of us don't appreciate it. And in so many ways . . . it's hard to say, but it's true. To a degree, it put highly-educated against the less educated . . . it put those with much basically against those with little, not realizing that . . . it very well could have been them. That it wasn't so much of what they did, and I'm not talking about working in a movement or anything, but just the blessing of God. Getting away from that, and then I'll get right back. I often watch people, when they talk about the kid out there on drugs—and mind you, it's bad—but, instead of downing that person, try and figure out a way to help that person, because they're a person that you, looking down your nose at, could easily have been you. And that's what the movement has caused, in many a case. Something I'd like to see happen, may never happen: socially, the movement has made great changes. We don't have to worry about going to the back doors of the restaurants and things to get our sandwiches. We don't have to worry about going to the back of the bus and giving somebody our seat. We don't have to work about whether we will be able to be served, period, just turned away. But still, in all, on payday and on Sunday, they are still your most segregated days of the week. Now, why is it segregated on payday? It's segregated on payday because, even now—and, mind you, we've made great strides—but that white kid working right along there beside you, basically doing the same

job that you were doing—maybe not as much in some instances—and might be getting paid better than you. Now, the movement did something else. We all may think of it as a civil rights movement, but it was more. Out of the civil rights movement came the equal opportunity thing, too. And, after civil rights blossomed, then the equal rights started to persist more. And who did it help? It helped the hundreds and hundreds of whites, especially women, as much as it did anybody else. And why people would complain about what's civil or equal or one thing another—when, as a whole, the movement helped the entire United States come to grips with itself and saw itself for what it really was. It was a place dominated, basically, by males, when in reality, you had as many good women out there working but was not being paid equally. So, with the civil rights movement and the equal employment thing, it basically helped everybody as a whole. The only other thing that can help us do better is get away from this, the civil rights, the equal rights, because they rights has guaranteed us so many things and **minor** cases that it's there, to a degree, and where it is not there, there is pretence that is there, anyway. Oh, yeah, you just as equal to me or you just as equal to me or anybody else, blah, blah. When, in reality, it may not be so. The thing that can change that—and they taking prayer out of school. But it's going to take the churches getting together to change that.

O: Mr. Proctor, you were saying earlier that, in some cases, what's happened is that that more wealthier or more advantaged people have been set

against people that don't have the advantages. How has that happened? What would be some examples of that?

P: Unilaterally, I might not have put it in words, but I'll take the university where I worked.

O: You work at Mississippi?

P: I work at Mississippi Valley State University. I'll take Mississippi Valley. And I hope all universities not that way. In many a cases, it's not really what you know at these places, it's who you know. And the executives—be it executive staff or your faculty members—they tend to look at the common person as less than their equal. The secretaries of your faculty heads is just another person, but they doing all of your work. The president of the university, his secretary knows more about what he's supposed to be doing, when he's supposed to be doing it, and all these things. But, basically, she's just another worker. I tend to say, sometimes, that education has to have a means by which it is measured, some sort of yardstick. But it does not necessarily mean that that person is any more qualified or suited than someone with a lesser degree. And, when you get people that's power-hungry in positions like this, it's amazing how these people can act or react. And that's what I'm referring to as . . . how the have-nots and those with plenty tend to act. The more they have, in some cases, it's seen as if they down their own people more so than any other segment of the population.

O: Mr. Proctor, if you were talking to a group of students and you were trying to explain to them about the differences now versus, say, life when you were a young person growing up, and the difference the movement has made in the United States, what would be some of the things that you would talk to them about?

P: I would basically tell them to be thankful for their forerunners, the people that went out there and struggled. Some died for them to obtain and have the rights and freedoms to which they now see as commonplace. I would tell them that this was not always necessarily so. I would remind them of times when instructors was reluctant to tell a kid exactly how to get into a university or college, because there was reason for that. At that particular time and age—and especially the Delta—whites in particular did not really want blacks to have much of an education. But he was not aware of the fact that, nowadays, it nearly takes a college education to drive a tractor. He didn't see it coming. Plus, at that particular time, you figured, the less you knew, the more control he could have over you. I would tell them, above all things, go out and strive to get a decent education, but never forget the people that blazed the trail and made this thing possible for you. Then, once upon completing your education, use it to the best of its advantage if it's going to help somebody. Don't be afraid to reach out and try and help. There is nothing great about I or my; that, in order to be successful, you got to bring somebody with you. Because, regardless of what one might think, everybody is still dependent. No one is independent.

Oh, yeah, you might have two or three million dollars or more that you don't need, but you don't run the soap factory that's going to give you that bath next morning. You don't run that clothing factory that's going to make your pants—yeah, you can go out there and buy it, but suppose these people weren't here. So everybody depends on—I tell them that this earth is a chain, and everybody needs everybody else. Suppose there was only lawyers. Who would make the soap? Suppose there were only car makers. Who would make the garments? Suppose there was only shoemakers. Who would plow the soil? Everybody has a role to play: that includes the educated or the non-educated. But we all human, and above all things, learn that. Go out and try and teach that. You're going to have some people that's going to fall by the wayside in the classroom, but try and tell them how to make a decent living if you get it.

[Break in recording]

Editor's note: End of Tape A, Side 1. The interview continues on Tape A, Side 2.

O: You had stressed our dependence on each other, in the end.

P: Yeah. And if someone should happen to fail in his quest for knowledge, don't down that person. If there's any way you can reach out and lend that person a helping hand, do that, because after all, we're all just plain human beings. All of us have different callings. All of us are made up differently to do certain things. And it's just a chain, where everybody depends on everybody else. The doctors, the lawyers, the shoemaker, the man that tilled the soil. We're all just one segment that's working in a chain

and, when the chain breaks and leave out any one segment of it, it refuse to be as long a chain as it was.

[End of interview]

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