

Samuel Proctor Oral History Program
College of Liberal Arts and Sciences

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-October 2013

MFP-077

Interviewee: Earnest Brown

Interviewer: Marna Weston

Date: March 20, 2011

B: Ready when you are, I am.

W: Okay, this is Marna Weston in Indianola, Mississippi on March 20, 2011. I am at Bell Grove Missionary Baptist Church and interviewing Mr. Earnest L. Brown, the superintendent of the Sunday school. Mr. Brown, thank you very much for meeting with me and talking with me this morning.

B: You're welcome.

W: Mr. Brown, could you please state where and when you were born?

B: I was born in Sunflower County; Inverness, Mississippi, in 1942 on George Beard Plantation.

W: And what was the day of your birth?

B: Day of my birth is June 22, 1942.

W: You said George Beard—

B: Beard. B- E- A- R- D. Yes.

W: And who is George Beard?

B: He was a farmer in Inverness, had a large plantation with a lot of tenants on his place. And my daddy worked the share crop with him, and at that time and he was a blacksmith for the farm.

W: Wow. Did you, in growing up, learn any of the techniques of blacksmithing? From your dad?

B: No, I didn't learn blacksmithing, but I did learn how to do a little mechanic work. My daddy used to, later on, moved to his dad's place, while I was still a young kid—you know, less than two years old. And we owned tractors and mules and

this type thing and my dad used to work on those tractors. And me being a little boy, really inquisitive, I was always around in the way, trying to learn something. And he would always let me do something. And I did learn how to do a little mechanic work as a result of being around him.

W: Marvelous. Could you tell me about your mom and dad, who are they? And, if you can recall, when and where they born?

B: My mom is named Lindy Tate originally, her maiden name. She was born in Macon, Mississippi. And my dad is Lesley Brown. He was born in Carroll County. And my dad, prior to my mama and my dad getting married, my dad, both of them had a previous marriage. My dad was married and his first wife died and they had five children.

W: And what was her name?

B: Evie. That was my dad's first wife which I never did a chance to know, because she passed away before I was born. And my mom was married to Frank Miller. And they separated and divorced. And they had three children. And my dad and my mom got married, and I was the only born child born after then, so I have all half brothers and sisters. My dad had five children and my mom had three children when they were born, and then I was born and that made a total of nine children altogether.

W: So ya'll had a baseball team. Just a start.

B: Basically. [Laughter] Yeah. So, five boys and four girls. I got four half-brothers and four half-sisters. So—

W: Could you tell me the names of your brothers and sisters?

B: My oldest brother named Leslie Brown, Jr. The next oldest one was Tommy Miller, the next one was Frank Miller, and my other brother was Milton DeWitt Brown. And my sisters, my oldest sister's name Caroline, my next oldest sister's named Velma, my next sister's named Barbie, and my baby sister's named Ruby.

W: And do they all still live in this area or have they dispersed to different parts of the country and the state?

B: They left here but, at this time, three of them are deceased. My oldest brother got killed in the Korean conflict; Leslie Brown, Jr., in 1951. My third oldest brother resided in Oakland, California. He passed January of 2006. And my oldest sister passed away April of 2006.

W: I'm very sorry for your losses. I'm sure that you think of them all the time.

B: Well, my oldest brother that living now Tommy Miller. He resides in Cleveland, Ohio. And my other brother that is still living, Milton Brown lives in Atlanta, Georgia. And I have one sister that lives in Cleveland, Ohio, my next to the oldest sister. My oldest sister live in Chicago and my baby sister live here in Indianola, Ruby.

W: That's good. Your brother who was killed in the war, Lester—you were young at that time, but do you have any reflections on that or you didn't know about it all—

B: Yeah, I really have some reflections on him. We were in the field, picking cotton, when we got the news. He went to the Korean conflict and they sent persons out to bring a telegram to notify us. We were in the field picking cotton at the time, in 1951. It was around September or October when we got the news that he had

been killed in the army. So, I was around about nine years old at that time, myself, 'cause I was born in 1942 and it was in 1951.

W: I'm sure you all took the news hard, but was there anything in particular that you can remember about your family's reaction to hearing the news?

B: Of course, you know, my mother broke down like most women do. You know, all of us were sad. And me being real young, you know, I really hadn't learned the value of the life and this type thing, so I probably didn't take it as hard as the other older ones. But later on, you know, as I reminisced back and realized that he was not coming back anymore, and then I think it had more effect on me at that time.

W: Was there a military funeral here locally or was he buried at Arlington or do you recall the funeral?

B: We had a funeral at our local church and they shipped the body back and he was buried at the military cemetery in Vicksburg, Mississippi.

W: Do you recall the pageantry of the cemetery, the flag and did they shoot the guns and the whole military ceremony?

B: Yeah, they did shoot the guns. You know, it's been a good while ago, like I said. It was in 1951 and that's been a while ago, but they did go through some ceremonies like shooting guns and this type thing. But one or two of them came to guard the body when we had the funeral at the church. Of course it was a steel casket that was bolted all the way around, and there was no way we could open it up. We was not able to review anything because it took a while to get the body back here, you know. The body probably wouldn't have been in too good of a

shape. We don't know what kind of shape it was in at the time. You know, we know he got killed on a battlefield.

W: Okay. I'd like to talk to you about what it was like growing up at your house. Did you have chores and responsibilities, and what was it like with you and your brothers and sisters? 'Cause you were the youngest, so, what was it all about—

B: Yeah, okay. Growing up, we did have chores. We, as I said, we was on my granddaddy's farm where most of my days were growing up. I just was born in Inverness, but we all had chores. The girls basically did the housework inside. They cleaned and did the washing and the boys did the work on the outside. We had to feed cows, milk cows, feed hogs, feed the mules and cut wood. And the boys did this type thing. My entire family went to the field, too. Cotton was our major crop that was grown. And the entire family chopped cotton, and picked cotton. And my mama would leave the field about an hour early and go cook dinner. And then we'd all go eat dinner and we'd all go back to the field. And then the girls would wash the dishes and the boys would get in the wood, and milk the cows and feed the stock.

W: So, it was a working farm. You would all involved in the income of the family.

B: Yes, we all were. And me being the baby, I got a little more privileges than the rest of them. [Laughter] I didn't have as many chores as they did, they kind of let me did what I wanted to do until all of them left home. When all of them left home and left me there, and about this time my daddy had gotten rid of the livestock and had gotten a tractor. And I basically did all the tractor driving and this type thing, after they were all gone, my daddy got tractors.

W: Did you grow anything besides cotton on the farm?

B: We'd grow soy beans and we also raised a garden. We raised a lot of our food that we ate, corn, sweet potatoes and butter beans and peas, okra and things like this, tomatoes, turnip greens, mustard greens, all type greens. So we all, we had our, you know, food that we grew there on the farm.

W: And you knew everything that went into it as far as fertilizer or whatever it is. You grew it yourself.

B: Right! [Laughter]

W: And same thing with the animals. If you slaughtered a hog or cows, you know what they had been eating.

B: Yeah, well, we had cows and hogs. We used to kill hogs, kill cows and my daddy would cure their meat before we got refrigeration. He would salt the meat down and put it in what we call a smokehouse. And we had meat the whole winter, to eat.

W: I'd like to talk to you a little bit about your earliest memories of education. Where did your first formal education take place?

B: My formal education, being raised on the county line of Sunflower and Humphreys County, where the road divided the county—we was in Sunflower County and the other side was Humphreys County—and in that community we called the county line, we was six and one half miles west of Isola, Mississippi, this is where we resided. And in that community on the county line, they had one school. First of all, before they put a school there, we had school in the church. Then they put a school in Humphreys County and every, all the elementary

children went to school. It went from one through eight. All the elementary children went to school at this particular school in that community. And we had to walk to school. And Humphreys County furnished a bus for the high school children to go to high school, from ninth grade through twelfth grade and it ran down that county line road. So, if you were in grades nine through twelve, you went to high school in Belzoni, and you went to elementary school at Allen Elementary School out on that county line until 1955 when they decided to integrate the schools.

W: What was the name of the church school, the original school?

B: Strangers Home Missionary Baptist Church, and that was the name of the school.

W: And who was the pastor there?

B: Our pastor was Reverend L. H. Howard, Lucas Howard.

W: And do you have any memories of Reverend Howard?

B: Sure I do. Reverend Howard baptized me in the Sunflower River in 1952.

W: Was it one of those old timey baptisms with people that came, they did old time songs?

B: Yeah. Old times songs on the river bank [Laughter]. The deacon would go out in the water and measure the water, stick a stick up and say, this is how far you go out in the water. So, we were baptized in the river. And I remained a member of that church until 1977, when I joined this church, Bell Grove Missionary Baptist Church. And I became a deacon of this church in 1978. And I've been a deacon of this church ever since 1978.

W: The Allen School, that was first through eighth grade? Was it a two-classroom deal with one through four?

B: There were two classrooms. That's what it was.

W: Who were the teachers?

B: Miss Lugusta Newell, who has passed away, was my teacher. And Miss Miller was another teacher. We had several teachers, they would go and come. But those were the teachers when I first started there. At that time, all the teachers came, basically, from the hills. Most of the hill children got a better education, in my opinion, than the Delta children, because they didn't do as much farming in the hills and didn't have to stay out of school and help gather those crops like the children in the Delta. And it seems as if those persons in the hills had more values on education, because most of the people in the hills own their own land than the blacks in the delta.

W: Okay. Well, first, how often, how long did you go to school during the school year? Was there a difference in the amount of time in the Delta and amount of time in the hill area?

B: No, there was no difference in the amount of time that you go to school. But a lot of times, the people in the delta would keep their children home after school started to help gather those crops, because they had a lot of cotton to gather. And our school month, I mean, school time for the year was basically eight months. And the high school was nine months at that time. So, I started off going to eight months school.

W: When you finally got to high school, what was the name of the school and what kind of activities did you do in high school?

B: When I finally got to high school in 1956, I came to Gentry High School. But, I before I came to high school, they decided to consolidate those schools. They moved that school out of school back to another school over there, and both counties had to furnish their own buses. And both of those buses, Sunflower County and Humphreys County buses, ran down the same road, that county line road. So, if you were one side, you were in Sunflower County, you caught the Sunflower County bus. And, if you on the other side of the road, you caught the Humphreys County bus. And that's the way we did it. [Laughter] But that was in 1955, and I finished my last part of elementary school at school east of Inverness called, Price Elementary School. I went the last six months of school there, and then I attended Gentry High School in 1956, where I graduated in 1960.

W: Who was the principal of Gentry High School?

B: A Mr. L. R. Brown was the principal of Gentry High School when I started, and he was my principal until I finished and until sometime in the late [19]80s. I graduated in 1964.

W: This the same Gentry High School that is here in town now?

B: Yeah, the one right up the street here.

W: But it was segregated at that time.

B: Yes, because they had a white school cross town called Indianola High School.

W: Okay, now, did you have any interaction at all with those white students or was it two different worlds?

B: It was two different worlds. No interaction.

W: You didn't play football against each other or basketball, or anything?

B: No, they didn't play against each other and I didn't participate in basketball. I love basketball; I always had a goal at home. But we lived so far out in the rural until... You know, I wasn't able to play, and my mama didn't want me to play, me being the baby. She thought I was always going to get hurt. [Laughter] She didn't want me to play football, not basketball. Well, I feel that I had to tell her in order to do it. Because I played basketball all time at home, always at a goal at the house.

W: Were you involved in any extracurriculars or leadership activities at school, or was it just you got on the bus and came back home?

B: Well, at school I was involved with 4-H. I was involved with FHA, a New Homemakers of America, 'cause I took shop all while I was there all four years. I took shop. And where I learned how to do some farming and then being in the 4-H club, at that time, the 4-H Club was connected with the school. And the county agent would always work with the 4-H Club and I was involved in a speaking contest, in entomology, that we went to Alcorn College, which is Alcorn State University now. And I was involved in a speaking contest under Mr. Cox. And I won first place in that speaking contest, and I won an Elgin watch. They gave me an Elgin watch as a gift.

W: Okay, now, maybe you can explain the significance of the Elgin watch. I don't know if you know, but people really don't wear watches anymore. They get their

time off the telephone. [Laughter] So, a lot of people don't have wristwatches. So, could you explain the significance of the Elgin watch?

B: Well, the Elgin watch was—a watch that was something kids didn't own, and very few adults, and this is the way we could tell time. So, you had your time right on your wrist. And I was real proud of that watch, because I was able to wear that watch. Of course my mama wouldn't let work in that watch because she would let me wear it when you do what we call dress up or go to church on Sunday, or going somewhere. But, she said it was not a work watch. [Laughter] So, we used to tell time a lot by the sun, back during that time. You look up at the sun and see where the sun is. But that watch, I was real proud of it because, you know, I had something that a lot of other children didn't have.

W: This public speaking competition through Mr. Cox, did that help you develop your leadership, being involved in those organizations?

B: I think so. I was very much interested in doing things like that and him giving me the opportunity to get up before a group to speak, I think that helped develop me and develop some of the shyness out of me, giving me the opportunity to get, speak before an audience, which a lot of people did not have it. And I always have been very inquisitive. My oldest sister's husband, who resides in Chicago at this time, he gave me a nickname, Straw. And he always calls me Straw Balls. He says I always like to boss. So, I always to be, I always wanted to be in charge. So, he nicknamed me Straw. That's what he called me today. Even though his wife passed away in 2006, but he still in Chicago, but that's what he

called me when he refer to me as Straw. But he says Straw Balls, that's the balls under the big bull. So, I think it did help develop that.

W: What is your definition of leadership?

B: My definition of leadership is one that's able to communicate and exemplify the ability to get the job done, and one that's able to persuade other peoples to do the job. But, first of all, you being a leader; you going to set the first example. That's my definition of leadership, being able to persuade others to get the job done.

W: So, you graduated from high school. What happens then?

B: After I graduated from high school, I attended Mississippi Vocational College at that time, which is now Mississippi Valley State University.

W: How did you end up out there?

B: Well, that was the only school in the area at the time. And I moved to Indianola with my baby sister, the one that live here, and I began to live with them. And I commuted each day on the bus to Mississippi Valley State because it was hardly no such thing and I never even think about going away. We could have went away and boarded and stayed at like Alcorn and those places. But uh, it was the closest school to me. And, not being one for being away from home, I still wanted to stay around home. So, I was able to commute every day and come back to Indianola and stay with my sister and her husband, and live right here in Indianola, where I'm familiar with everybody. All of my classmates and some of my other classmates went to Mississippi Vocational College. And my major was business education, at that time. And I was able to go for four years and

graduate in four years on time. And uh, you haven't asked me anything about that other part, marriage or anything so I don't know if—

W: I was about to get to that. I was going to say-

B: Well, I'll just wait—

W: Insert your family—

B: And let you ask me what you want to ask me about that.

W: Okay, well, you finished your four years at Valley and you're living with your sister and her husband.

B: Yes.

W: Did you think about starting a family on your own?

B: Yes, sir. I met my now wife when I was at Mississippi Valley. Her major was business education.

W: And what is her name?

B: Her name was Anna May Turner.

W: Well, how did you end up developing a relationship with Miss Turner? How did you all meet?

B: We both was. Majored in business and we took classes together, and we used to study together. But she lived on campus because she's from Lorman, Mississippi, which is about 150 mile right down by Alcorn College, not too far from Alcorn College. We would study together. We had the same major, and we just started talking and got interested in each other. And we got engaged and got married the next month after we graduated. We graduated in May and got married in June of 1964.

W: Where did you get married at?

B: We got married at her church, called Rose Hill Christian Church in Lorman, Mississippi.

W: And who married you?

B: Her pastor. I'm trying to think of his name. Reverend Gordon married us at the time.

W: Okay. And you graduated, you married in 1964. What are your next steps?

B: My next step. We were very fortunate, I think. At the time, a Reverend Matthews, the pastor of the church, brother was the principal of East Sunflower Elementary School—and he had just gotten that job in November. And at that time, they were furnishing houses for principals to live in, and Reverend Matthews had built him a home here in Indianola. So, he was not interested in living in that house, and they needed some teachers at East Sunflower Elementary School. And I told the superintendent, which is name of C. J. Edwards at the time, that I would be getting married in June and my wife was finishing school also. And they needed some elementary school teachers, but both of us was business majors. So, at the time he told us, he told me, said, y'all going to get married, I will give both of y'all a job. And I will let you all live in that principal's home rent free, if you would just watch the campus. And only thing you have to pay is the utility, the utility bills. I didn't have to pay any kind of rent at all. But, in the meanwhile, both of us was certified in business, so we had to get a permit in order to teach in elementary school. They gave us a permit which was good for one year at a time, based on the fact if you go back and get at least six hours of elementary education, you

can renew that permit for the next three years. So, my wife and I both went back to Mississippi Vocational College at that time, each summer, and took courses, working on a major in elementary education. And we went back for three summers and we were able to get a, I guess you would call it a minor, but I call it a major in elementary education. 'Cause we were able to get a license to teach elementary education. So, both of us became certified to teach in elementary education after that, and my wife continued to teach there for her whole career, thirty-one years. I taught there for six years, and I was the boys' basketball coach for six years, from 1964 to 1970, when they integrated the schools. And I was moved then, transferred to Ruleville Junior High School, which used to be the white high school in Ruleville, Mississippi. And I became the boys' basketball coach there and assistant football coach in grades seven through nine.

W: I want to talk to you a just few minutes and thank you for introducing that subject about your perceptions from back when you were recruited to your first education job that you were just telling me about. I'd like to know how you characterize the recruitment process. And you've talked about C. J. Edwards and the whole, the retention process of encouraging you to stay at the job, and you've talked about the six hours of continuing education credits for three years. I'd like to hear your thoughts on what implications there were for your academic, professional and personal life based upon the path that you chose. And I also want to talk to you about the personal and professional connections that formed your decisions to accept or reject future jobs that you took when you got hired, you know, because of this entire process of talking to people. What was the process that you used in

your mind if you were going to say, am I going to accept the job or not take a job? Throughout the rest of your career. And I'd like to hear you describe your communication connections with others. Maybe later on you could draw it out and I'll send you something, but just to talk about what those pathways looked like that connected you to other people and who your mentors were and how they talked to you. So, with that being set as a foreground, my questions are, how did you select your initial job in education? And I think that you just briefly described it, but if you would just review it for a second. How did you select that first job?

B: Well, select it, you know I sent many applications in business and surprisingly enough I did not hear from any of those jobs. [Laughter]

W: Yeah, though, when you say surprisingly, why was that? I know that you're being factious, but what, what . . . Because somebody later on might not understand what the times were and now, why do you say surprisingly enough?

B: Well, jobs was very limited in business. They only just had both one business teacher per high school or two, if it was a large one. So, it was like—jobs was not plentiful in business. They were more plentiful in the elementary education. There were more. It was a greater need for teachers in elementary education, especially males. Men was not teaching; mostly, you find women. And so, mostly everywhere was—when I found out Reverend Matthews was looking some teachers, then I talked to the superintendent. And he offered me this job and, basically, that was the only professional type job that was available in Mississippi during that time, was teaching. That's why most of the people, and most my

sisters and brothers left and went to Chicago, the army and Ohio and different places. That's why they left. And that's what motivated me to go to school, to do these something else, because I did not want to be a farmer the rest of my life and I did not want to live under those same conditions, I wanted to better myself. So, I had something to motivate me, to want to go. So, I was anxious to get that job, because I always did love basketball and I had the opportunity also to coach and so they gave me a greater incentive to take the job when he told me he needed a basketball coach, also.

W: Okay. Well, now, basketball notwithstanding and some of the extras, what did you think about prior to choosing to accept that first job?

B: I was thinking that, if I don't take this one, then I may not get the offer on another one. So, I needed to take the first job I could get because if you recall, I told you my wife and I got married the next month after we got out of school. I'm married; I got a wife, without a job. So, I thought that fit right in, that both of us was offered a job! 'Cause the superintendent kept on asking me, are you sure y'all going to get married? [Laughter] I said, it's planned, you know. And we supposed to. And he said, if you do, then I can give both of y'all a job. So it was kind of like a package deal, you know, that, if I got married, I had a job and she had a job. And they had split sessions at that time. You probably not familiar with that. In the Delta, they used to—we used to go two months of summer school, July and August. Then we started back late October.

W: Because of the harvest.

B: Because of the harvest, you out for that. So, I worked the last year, my wife and I. A split session. So, we went to work, got married in June, went to work in July. And worked July and August, then stayed out and I worked at the cotton press, where they press the cotton, in between. In between school's out—from August, end of August, until the end of October, I was lucky enough to get me a job at a cotton press. And having a college education, I was very fortunate that I didn't have to do those hard jobs; all I had to do is read the names off the tags off the bales of cotton. You know, I didn't have to go there and lift those bales and do those type things, 'cause I had just graduated from college and they wanted somebody to read. And I was able to read those names and I was lucky enough to get that all I had to do when they put them on the scales, was read off whose it was.

W: Okay. Who were the specific colleagues, friends or mentors that informed your decision to accept that first job? You mentioned Mr. C. J. Edwards, was there was there anyone else—

B: Yeah, he was the superintendent, but my parents and my now wife, Annie May, she encouraged us to take it. But my parents, her parents, my brother-in law and my sister that I lived with told me that we very fortunate and we should go on and pursue that. And but like I said, we had no other offer. So, basically, I didn't have another choice. [Laughter] I didn't have no options of taking it at the time. But they encouraged me to take it and go on back to school and get certified in elementary education—so I could have a permanent job.

W: How did racial situations throughout your career affect whether or not you would or not accept a job that was offered to you?

B: Well, at the time when we first got into this, you was only going to get an offer in a black, predominantly black school. So, that was not an issue because you was not going to get an offer in those schools anyway, so . . . Therefore, you know, we were kind of satisfied as this being home. We been raised in the rural, never been anywhere. About that thing, I'd probably been to Chicago a couple of times in my life, and that basically was it. And we're not used to being away from home, so with the job offer right at home, that's mostly what influenced me to stay with that job, but you was not going to get offers in there because, at that time, they had not started blacks to working in the predominantly white schools. You still had what they called black schools and white schools. And you was not going to get any offers there anyway. So, therefore, you knew that you were going to be working in a predominantly black school.

W: Can you discuss a situation where you actually left a job because of information communicated to you by a colleague, a friend or mentor?

B: No, I never left a job, for all I really had . . . Well, I guess I can even say three jobs. When I left the first one because they was integrating, when they moved me from Sunflower to Ruleville, they was integrating the schools, so they had have a percentage of white teachers and a percentage of black teachers in that school. And the superintendent asked me to transfer at that time, and that was the only reason. I was glad to transfer, because at East Sunflower court and basketball, we had a dirty court to play on.

W: A dirt basketball court?

B: Yes, sir.

W: Wow.

B: And you could only play when it was dry.

W: [Laughs] Yeah, I guess so.

B: It was outside, in the very weather. So, they had a gymnasium at this school and when he asked me to transfer—even it was about, I would say, fourteen or fifteen miles further away from home—I was glad to transfer because I had a gymnasium in order to practice and play my games in. So, I thought that was advancement. And they started giving me a supplement for coaching, which I was not getting at East Sunflower. I thought I'd get a supplement for coaching basketball and football; it was very small. But, it was better, it would help me pay for my gas.

W: Better than zero.

B: Yes.

W: Can you describe a specific situation where communication from a colleague, a friend, or a mentor helped shape your career positively? And then, maybe if it did happen, one where it shaped your career negatively, but how did information from others help shape your career?

B: I would talk to the older teachers that was already at the school. I remember very vividly talking to an older gentleman named Mr. James Black, from Ruleville, Mississippi. He was coaching girls' basketball. He had been coaching boys' basketball, and he was supposed to be the assistant for the girls' team when I

started work. But, he was the previous coach. I got a chance to work with him for one year. And he retired at end of 1965, the end of the school year, 1965. And I used to talk to him all the time and because we were together, we'd play games. And he always told me about his career and playing football in college and he would always tell me, you know, how I need to carry myself and how I need to help the children, what I had to do to help and discipline the children. And he influenced me to hang in there and stay on the job. And, one day, you'll be ready to retire, cause I'm getting ready to retire. After one year with him, and he said, if you stay there, you'll be a retiree, you won't want to work no more after that. So, he was the main influence. And plus, my principal, with Reverend Matthews, John Matthews, he encouraged me to go on with school and further my education. And, as a result of that, I was able to continue and get a master's degree and a specialist's degree in elementary education. And, in the process, I was able to get certified in administration. So, I ended up with three majors, a business major, an elementary education major, and an administration major.

W: And you feel your mentors were integral in letting that happen.

B: I feel that they were. Me and some of my friends that lived on my street, Mr. Odell Tate, he encouraged me to go and get a master's degree. At the time, he and about two other guys were riding up to Delta State, working on their masters degrees. And they was almost through. And this was in 1971. And he encouraged me to go with them and start working on my master's degree. And he said, you need to come on ride up to Delta State with us and get your degree.

So, I got in the car and started riding with them. And all of them finished at the end of the first session, in 1971. And I said, I'm not going back up there no more.

W: [Laughter] Why was that?

B: Well, I got the feeling that the system wasn't fair at the time and I just felt like they were grading you different, if you white and if you black. And I just didn't feel like I was being treated quite fairly, but you know you can make it. And I did make it. Tate told me say—he kind of tried to embarrass me a little bit. He say, you need to go on back the next session. He said everybody and in the car going back. So, you need to go back. So, we through. We got our masters'. And you need to go back. So, I got in the car and rode back up to there to register. Tate got in the car and I got real angry with Tate. But I'm glad today. And we went our separate ways when we got to the campus, to register, having different majors. We had some that was P.E. majors, I was elementary education major. And I believe the other guy was an elementary education major. But he ain't graduating. So, all of us had different advisors and different departments. So, we got out of the car and we going to meet back up at noon to come back home. So, when we got back to the car, everybody was talking about what they was taking, how many hours they was taking and what they classes were. And I noticed that Odell Tate didn't have anything. [Laughter] And I said, where's your stuff? He said, I don't have any. I just came back today to bring you. That what he told me. And I sure 'nough got angry with him then. And he said he just came back to bring me. And he laughed about that until he passed away. He used to come back—he moved to Virginia and he used to live across the street from me. And

he passed away, you know, some years later, but when he would come back during the summer, he said, Brown, you know when I tricked you back to Delta State? He say, you glad you went? And I answered, I said, I sure am. So, he was very instrumental in getting me to defend that master's degree. And I'm glad today that I did. 'Cause if it had not been for him, I probably would not have gone back, 'cause he made me feel it look bad when he said, everybody in the car going back and we through. And you just now starting, so you know you need to go back.

W: Can you tell me about your children, your personal family?

B: Children? My wife and I has not been real lucky with children. Our first child was born in 1969. He was born with a cord wrapped around his neck that cut off the oxygen. He was never able to walk or talk, a boy named Kevin. And he lived about three years and eleven months, he never was—his body never did develop like it was supposed to. He was never able to walk or talk. And he passed away in 1973. He was born in [19]69. So, we rocked on. And my wife had a miscarriage in 1975. And in 1976, we had a stillborn girl. After eight months, the cord came loose. Her name was Valerie, she was born dead. And in 1978, we had a son born named Carlos Brown. And he was born with asthma. And he went through high school, he played in the marching band at Gentry High School in 1996. And he started at Alcorn and went to college and played in the marching band at Alcorn State University for four years. And he didn't graduate, but he was not interested in school because he didn't have to come up like we did. I think we gave him too much. I think that's what it was. So, he would go to school

to be with his friends and things, and he went to school down there to 2003. And I told him at that point he needed to get out and get a job and go to work. So, he didn't go back because he was making bad grades, flunking; wasn't going to class. And I said, well, you need to go out until you make your mind up you want to go to school. You need to get you a job. And, when you decide you want to go to school, we will help you go back. So he got a job with Sunflower County Schools as a safety aid for the school. He walked around the school, at East Sunflower, the same school that my wife and I worked at. My wife, as I told you, did thirty-one years there. She did all her career there at East Sunflower. So, he got a job there, like in June. And he worked until December. And, unfortunately, he got killed in a car wreck on the twenty-eighth of December 2003. So we don't have any surviving children, biological children. But we got plenty of God's children. We got several—we got about three goddaughters and a godson. And two of the goddaughters is just like biological children. Which one, the oldest one, lives in South Haven, Mississippi. She used to live here in the north, but these children got attached to us. She did and the young man—because they were from the community of Sunflower, where we taught school—and they used to come home and spend nights with us, two or three nights at a time, and they would cry when their parents told them they had to come home. And right now, we still have a relationship with that goddaughter. And we picked up a couple more goddaughters since then, but that godson and goddaughter we been had ever since our early years of teaching.

W: What do you think is the legacy that you and your wife have left to education and this community?

B: I would think that the legacy is that we have left is that we have laid the groundwork that education is the key to success. And God. And don't forget God. Your church work is very much important. I've been very active in church. My wife was brought up active in church, and I think we were left those two legacy, that you going to need an education in order to be successful in life and you going to need God in your life to lead and guide you. As a result of that, you know, I serve in many capacities. Like I say, when I left Ruleville, I never did tell you about that. I stayed in Ruleville Junior High School and coached basketball and football for twelve years there. And then an opening came at Moorhead Middle School for a principal, which was in the all-white community, and I was the first African American principal of that school, in 1982, with me having getting my license in administration and supervision. When I heard of the principal leaving and not coming back, I immediately made an application for the job. And, being in the system already, I think it gave me the first choice at the job. So, I was able to get the principal job at Moorhead Middle School, which was Moorhead Elementary School at the time, grades six through eight. From 1982 to 1995, for thirteen years, I spent most of my career there, thirteen years; I only spent twelve years in Ruleville, and six in Sunflower. And then my wife and I both had a retirement together. In 1995, we both retired after thirty-one years. I stayed out for three and one half years, and a friend of mine that I used to teach with in Ruleville—he was a social studies teacher and I was a math teacher—

became the superintendent of the Sunflower County School District in 1998. And he tried to get me to come out of retirement to be his assistant, assistant superintendent. And I would not come out; I told him I would help him. So, he made me his assistant. And I started in January 1999 and I did that to June in 2004, worked half a year. And in our system, retirement system, you can work a half a year, half as much as the job without affecting your retirement. So I worked as his assistant from January of 1999 to June of 2004. And helping him out, so I was assistant superintendent. So, going back to your question, the legacy, I think that all that, my work that I've done at—in education, is a legacy. And my wife, she did thirty-one years and she went back and served as a librarian at East Moorhead elementary, which is now Rosser, James Rosser Elementary, named after the principal who retired. And me becoming a deacon of this church, uh, they must have—Mr. Davis influenced me to be a member of this church. He was the biggest influence. And I became a deacon of this church, so that put me in more leadership, and that was in 1977. And, in 1978, they recommended me as a deacon of the church, and that put me in a bigger leadership. And, in 1983, the superintendent in 1982, let me back up. The superintendent start pastoring. And they were going to move Mr. Davis in there and he was a teacher. And at that time, he from Philadelphia, Mississippi, De Kalb, and he had a lot of responsibilities back home, and he came to me and asked me to serve as superintendent of the Sunday school. And I served as the superintendent of the Sunday school since January of 1983. And I've attended the National Conference of Christian Education every year since then, and I've been able to

take all types of courses in leadership and different things as a church deacon, trustee, vacation bible school. And all this, I think, attributed to my legacy. And I remember all this list behind me, I will leave all this behind me, and I think all of this will be a part of my legacy that I left her. My wife became the secretary of the church, I don't remember exactly what year, but after the man who was the secretary went blind and lost his eyesight. And I know she'd been the secretary probably, probably twenty-some years, close to thirty years. So, I think our church leadership and our education leadership is the legacy that we left back in the community. And I also got on the school board for Indianola School District in 1997, and I've been a school board member, so we are active in the community. My wife volunteered at the B. B. King museum. Now she does volunteer work there. So, I think all of this is a part of our legacy that we've left; that you leave something, you give back to the community. Once, you know, you make it, you help somebody else to make it. And we helped a lot of children, bought a lot of children graduation gifts and this type thing, and helped just about everything in the community that we'd get an invitation to it. Anything to be donated to, we definitely going to get an invitation. [Laughter]Ggoing to be asked to donate to this, and donate to that. And we always were able to do that, so I think all of this is the legacy that we are leaving back, that we'll leave you.

W: I was going to say, all because you met a girl in a business education class at Valley.

B: Right! [Laughter]

W: Mr. Earnest L. Brown, I want to thank you very much for this opportunity to talk to you about your career and your perspectives and your family life. It's been incredible to speak with you. On behalf of our oral history program, I want to thank you for this time. And I like to close all my interviews by, in addition to those thanks, giving you the opportunity to say anything that you would care to. An observation about the interview, maybe something we didn't get to, or any closing remarks that you might have, whatever they may be. And when you conclude those remarks, those conclude our interview today. I thank you.

B: I'd just like to say that I feel very fortunate and lucky to be one chosen to do the interview, and I thank Mr. Davis for recommending me to you. And I hope that the information that I've given you will be beneficial to you and that if you need me for anything in the future, I will be glad to do whatever I can that can help contribute to your success.

[End of interview]

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