

Samuel Proctor Oral History Program
College of Liberal Arts and Sciences

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The Samuel Proctor Oral History Program (SPOHP) was founded by Dr. Samuel Proctor at the University of Florida in 1967. Its original projects were collections centered around Florida history with the purpose of preserving eyewitness accounts of economic, social, political, religious and intellectual life in Florida and the South. In the 45 years since its inception, SPOHP has collected over 5,000 interviews in its archives.

Transcribed interviews are available through SPOHP for use by research scholars, students, journalists, and other interested groups. Material is frequently used for theses, dissertations, articles, books, documentaries, museum displays, and a variety of other public uses. As standard oral history practice dictates, SPOHP recommends that researchers refer to both the transcript and audio of an interview when conducting their work. A selection of interviews are available online here through the UF Digital Collections and the UF Smathers Library system.

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-October 2013

MFP-050A

Interviewee: Dorsey White

Interviewers: Khambria Clarke and Candice Ellis

Date: August 21, 2009

C: We are here with Mr. Dorsey White. My name is Khambria Clarke.

E: I'm Candice Ellis and it's August 21, 2009. We're here in Indianola to conduct these interviews on behalf of the Samuel Proctor Oral History Program.

C: So, if you could start off by telling us a little bit about your background; your childhood.

W: That's many years ago. We look at the year of 1935. Can you imagine what was going on at that time? That's when I was born in the rural community, farm community. As you know, it was segregated. The schools were deplorable. I attended elementary school from elementary through the eighth grade, in a church. I had one teacher until I was about third grade, one teacher taught it all. About the fourth year, we had two teachers, and we attended school in a church. The facilities maybe nonexistent, you know? They were real primitive, but we scuffled and made it. Later years after I finished elementary school, I went to a Rosenwald High School. I don't know if you're familiar with that program, but it was a rich Jew—in fact, he was affiliated with Sears and Roebuck. Had a lot of money and built a lot of schools in deprived areas, little Rosenwald schools. You hear about that?

E: Hm-mm.

C: I wasn't familiar with those. So, the conditions were a lot better in . . . ?

W: Yeah, and improved. In other words, we had a nicer building and a little better facilities—much better facilities. They were small schools, but it was much better than what we had. So, I finished high school at one of those Rosenwald schools.

Later, I was fortunate enough to go to Mississippi Valley. Got a degree in technical education. Had some military training while I was in school; I was in the army reserves. I was promoted to staff sergeant and I was in charge of the motor, what they call the motor pool at that time, all of the transportation. I taught guys how to drive trucks and handle equipment, and that enhanced my driver's ed training career. When I got out of college and I taught driver's education and automobile mechanics for a few years after I got out of college. Later years, I was married, had a small family. We didn't make a whole lot of money teaching school, so I quit teaching and took a job as a mechanic in the local Ford dealership here in Indianola. I worked here four years and made twice the money that I was making teaching. So, about four years later, this manpower program came to town, to the South, like Head Start, but in this case it was for adults. You teach them how to do skills. So, I started teaching again and I taught adults how to do mechanic work for several years. I was self-employed; had my own shop, and I had a thirty-year independent garage. Made a lot of money, a lot of friends, educated four girls. Now, I'm retired and enjoying the land.

E: Relaxing, yeah. Did you say you were born and raised here in the Delta area?

W: Yeah, on a plantation. M.P. Sturdivan's plantation up at Glendora, Mississippi. That's about, was in the neighborhood, of the famous murder case occurred, Emmett Till. That was in my backyard, where all this transpired. I knew most of the characters that was involved with that.

C: So what was it like, kind of seeing it? You said it was right in your backyard, you know? What was it like, experiencing that firsthand, almost? It's like you're right in the crux of the action.

W: It was . . . it was kind of . . . well, I don't know, a little frightening, I guess. But I lived a kind of sheltered life, because I was fortunate enough to have a strong father. My father was a strong, courageous man, and he protected me as much as you could expect to be from that type of stuff, because I didn't have to work and be in contact with those people. That shielded me from a lot of things, you know, a lot of other people had to go through. But I guess it was kind of like living in the forest, where you got a lot of vicious animals, and you kind of be careful of where you look and where you step, stuff like that. But you get accustomed to it and you know how to deal with it.

C: So you said that your father sheltered you from a lot of the stuff that was going on outside of your home, outside of your town. What was your first experience with racism and prejudice, or did you have any early experiences with that?

W: A little bit, not a whole lot. Because the plantation I was born on, there was only one white family other than the man that owned the plantation. The overseer was a man that owned the plantation, was a very liberal person, and he didn't allow the overseer to mistreat us people who worked for him. So, that kind of helped a whole lot, because a lot of things that other people encountered, my father didn't encounter because he was living on a plantation with a very liberal person. So, a lot of things that did happen, we hear about it happening in other places, but it didn't happen there because the boss himself didn't allow a lot of things to go on,

so that made a big difference. So, my father bought his own farm when I was about fifteen years old, and I never worked for nobody else until I was grown. So, that's how I was sheltered from a lot of stuff, because I didn't have to answer to nobody but my father.

E: So, how was the transition from when you were kind of living sheltered with your father to then when you attended university and you weren't kind of sheltered and helped by him in that way. Was it shocking to you? Is there any . . . ?

W: No. It wasn't too shocking, because I had learned from him how to maneuver and protect myself and defend myself. So, it wasn't too much different. I just continued to, more or less, follow the pattern of behavior that I was brought up with, and it worked out quite well.

C: What year did you say you attended—you say Mississippi Valley?

W: Mm-hm. 1958 was when I graduated, but I enrolled in [19]54, 1954.

E: Then, after that, did you go immediately into mechanics, did you say? You were driving . . .

W: No. After I got out of college, I went to Toledo. I stayed there for a while. I tried to live up north and I worked on a garage there for about four or five months. Came home for Christmas, when I left to Toledo in the summer, the temperature was ten below zero, and when I came back home it was thirty-two degrees. So I guess you know what happened. [Laughter]

E: Yeah, yeah.

W: I refused to go back, so then I began my teaching career. My first job was Temple High School, Vicksburg, Mississippi. I worked there four years.

E: In what year did you do that?

W: Hmm?

E: In what year?

W: That was 1959.

E: Okay.

C: So, were you in Indianola when the Freedom Summer of [19]64 activities were taking place?

W: Yes, I was here then.

C: What was your impression of those activities?

W: My impression of what?

C: Of the activities, because it was lot of stuff happening.

W: Oh, yeah. It was a lot of stuff going on, but I . . . participated with them, and assisted as much as I could, but I was not a nonviolent person. I hadn't been taught to be nonviolent. I was taught to protect myself. I just couldn't imagine me allowing somebody to beat me over the head with an axe handle just 'cause they enjoyed it. So, I stayed away from the marches and the demonstrations, but I attended meetings and assisted other ways. My wife testified a fellow in court two times in order for the city and the county, for the government to get a case against the city and the county for school integration and the voter registration. So, as a result, I had to sit up and guard my house at night, keeping them from burning it down and stuff like that. I was involved. But I didn't march or demonstrate because I believe in self-protection.

C: So, did you find that there were many other people that shared your view and kind of stayed out of demonstrations and protests, or were most people involved with the nonviolent side of things?

W: No, there was quite a few people that stayed away totally, and availed themselves at all. But it was more or less the people that was real active were the ones that didn't have stable employment, people that had . . . they were either unemployed or had real low-level jobs. So, I guess they figured they didn't have too much more to lose. But a lot of people that worked in other places had to be careful about being involved, to the extent that you go to jail and stuff like that because you were, you can imagine how . . .

E: It was your job, right.

W: But many of them contributed in other ways. They didn't be on the line as far as putting their bodies out there, but they were behind the scenes working, you know.

E: Did you ever get in any kind of fight, any physical altercation? Or were you able to completely avoid that?

W: No, I had no altercation because I didn't—

E: Stayed away.

W: Yeah, I stayed away from the marches, demonstrations. But I did other things, like I helped to bring—in fact, I was the first person to become involved with Head Start. Now, that was a no-no. The government, I mean, the local power structure, didn't want Head Start in Sunflower County. So, I was instrumental in bringing that in and setting the Head Start program, stuff like that.

E: Why don't you tell us a little bit about Head Start and kind of how you influenced that in Sunflower County, kind of what you did to facilitate it here.

W: Well, we got organized, and we were a little late finding out the details about how to go about setting up Head Start because it had been nothing out to later, teach you how to do it. So, we had to more or less listen and tell other places, like I went to Greenville. They had one over there. I met with people like Dr. Page and some of the other people that had one in Greenville, found out how to do it. So, we found out all of the money had been let, and that was money that was supposed to have gone to this town, I think. Yazoo City had gotten it. But we're . . . they was locating some money that Leland was supposed to have had and they hadn't applied for it. So, we applied for that money and had our first Head Start in Leland. The next year, we knew how to get started early, and we got involved here in Sunflower County. We ran the program and when they found out that we was going to do without them, they came in and formed a cap organization which was umbrella to encompass all of the federal programs, and we had a dual program for about three years. They were able to overpower us and finagle around, get the Head Start totally under their control.

C: Are you still involved in the Head Start program now, or . . . ?

W: No, I resigned from the Head Start about a year before they abandoned it. I was one of the board members for the first . . . two or three years.

E: What kind of stuff did you guys do with that?

W: Well, see, at that time, it wasn't the type program that the local government wanted to come to Sunflower County, because in order to utilize federal money

you had to totally integrate, like the libraries, health department, doctors' office. You had to have just one waiting room where everybody go in. But, see, during that time, it was illegal to have an integrated setting, which mean that all of the doctors' offices had two waiting rooms: had colored on one side, white on the other side, you know. A restaurant—well, maybe not a restaurant, but any public facility like a service station, they had white bathrooms on one side, they had colored bathrooms on the other side, which means that they had to have four. You know? Ladies, white ladies, white men, colored ladies and colored men, you know. So, had that type of system. But, in order to have federal money, you couldn't use facilities like that; everybody had to use the same, you know. Colored man and white men have to use the same bathrooms, and ladies the same way. This is the reason that they didn't want Head Start in Sunflower County, because it was going to cause too much integration, too much . . . what did they call it? At that time, mingling that race, and they was trying to keep everybody separate.

E: During your time with Head Start and working with that, what would you say your greatest achievement was? What really stands out in your mind as just something really great that you were able to do?

W: A lot of people that had low-level jobs was able to get a job. Many of them didn't have jobs at all. We encouraged them to go to school and get their GED or whatever, you know, learn some kind of skill. So, when they built Head Start, didn't last forever. They would be better off and be able to make a living.

E: Have an education, yeah.

W: To me, that was the greatest part that I appreciated the most.

E: Getting people through school.

W: Yeah.

E: That's good, yeah.

W: Improving the quality of life and kind of giving them skills to keep going, you know, once . . . Head Start did play out. Just advance. Many of them became teachers and entrepreneurs.

C: So, you were kind of there, here in Indianola, before many changes had occurred.

W: When changes.

C: [Laughter] Right, when changes had occurred. Now that you see a lot of things that have changed, what are your thoughts? Do you think that there's more to be done or are you satisfied and happy with the changes that have . . . ?

W: I'm very sad, because we have not taken advantage of the opportunities that we have, you know. We have better school opportunities, and young people just are not taking advantage of it. A lot of other things—we don't have it together, the organization, like we need to, to work towards a common goal and get things done. Everybody kind of got complacent and enjoying the good fruits, and they just eating and getting fat, and forgot about the work that needs to be done. As far as us, seems like we kind of going back rather than progress.

C: Right.

W: That's the way I feel about it.

E: Why do you think that is? Just people, like you said, are growing complacent and kind of . . .

W: Just laid back.

E: Just too, yeah.

W: Enjoying the nice homes and the fine cars and getting their nails done and getting their hair done, stuff like that. Just.

E: Mm-hm. Not striving, really.

W: Lost direction. Lost direction, right.

E: Right, just maybe kind of stagnant right now, mm-hm.

C: What kind of things do you think still need to evolve here in Indianola?

W: Well, primarily, we need to raise good, respectable children. We need to give them a sense of direction; teach the need for education. You know, be less self-destructive.

E: Mm-hm. Education is really at the root of it, you would say, right?

W: Well, yeah. You know, education encompasses enough, probably, most of what I'm aware of right now. To me, education is much more than books on the shelf. It's a mindset and a behavior pattern that you learn to go forward with, even though you might not . . . you might not have a PhD degree, but you're a better person as a result. That's the kind of education I'm talking about, knowing how to deal with people and have respect, even though you might not have a college degree. But you're a better person as a result, adhering to certain rules and things of that nature; being appreciative and respectful.

E: And—no, you go.

C: When you were—because you did teach for a while—

W: Eleven years, right.

C: Is that something that you tried to instill in your students?

W: Sure. When I was teaching adult mechanics, I taught two methods. The people that had the skills to go forward to the top, I taught them how to use technical tools and instruments, and one that couldn't learn, maybe had the lower level of education like mathematics, stuff like that. Some instruments they couldn't learn to master, but I would teach them how to do it in a more primitive way so they could do it in the backyard, make a living, you know. He could do things at home and use crude tools to get the job done so he could still do the job and make a living. But those who had higher education and could learn to use micrometers and other testing equipment, I teach them how to do it. But, if they couldn't master that, I teach them a method that he could use to still get the job done and get paid for it, you know.

C: Right.

E: You said you had your own—you worked as a mechanic as well, and you had your own—

W: Right, I worked for a Ford dealer as a mechanic. That enhanced my skills a lot because I was able to get a lot of bulletins that came out from the manufacturer and . . .

E: Learn from them.

W: Mm-hm, yeah. That helped me a whole lot. But I worked there four years, and then I went back to teaching. After seven years of that, I went self-employed.

E: Mm-hm.

W: That was my lifelong ambition, to own my own garage.

E: Oh, that's good.

W: Be my own boss, yeah.

E: What was the hardest thing about that, about reaching that goal?

W: Finding qualified people to work with.

E: Right, right. Where was your business?

W: Here in Indianola.

Paul Ortiz: Candice, do you want to come out? We have one more person to be interviewed.

E: Oh, sure. Sure.

O: Oh, hey.

W: Hey, how you doing?

O: Good to see you.

W: Good to see you again, right.

O: Is he telling you the truth, or is he . . . ? [Laughter]

W: Yeah, you can compare the old tapes and . . .

O: How are you doing? It's so good to see you.

W: Yeah, about as well as can be expected. You know, I'm a little bit older now than I was when . . .

O: You don't look any older. I interviewed him in 1995. He doesn't look a day older.

[Laughter]

C: Wow.

O: You look great.

W: Yeah, well, thank you. I'm much older now and, I guess my little horizon is closing in, but I'm enjoying life.

O: All right, that's good. Are you still keeping in touch with a lot of your friends who you sent me out to interview?

W: Oh, yeah. Yeah, we're still in touch, right.

O: Uh-huh. Well, good. Yeah, and your daughter got her PhD and . . . ?

C: Wow.

W: Oh, yeah.

O: That was a great accomplishment.

W: I'm glad she was able to get it. It was a struggle for it, but she made it.

O: She stuck with it.

W: Oh, yeah, right.

O: That's wonderful. Well, we are interviewing three people simultaneously right now. It's great to see you.

W: Good to see you, too. Right. We'll stay in touch. I know you'll be back again.

O: Yes, sir. I'll be back next summer. [Laughter]

E: Should I do it in this room, or . . . ?

O: Let's try to find another quiet corner.

E: Yeah, all right. Okay.

C: I guess I'll ask you a couple more questions, and . . . all right.

W: Okay.

C: So, Dr. Ortiz mentioned your daughter, and I know that your daughter is involved with the civil rights movement here. So, talk a little bit about that, if you can.

W: Well, she wasn't involved in the civil rights movement because she was too young.

C: But the current . . .

W: Primarily what she has done now is trying to keep the historical part of it alive so that it won't get lost in history, and that's a great thing that you all are doing, to put it in the archives and public brochures and things, maybe put it on the website so people have access to it. But she is just trying to keep it from being lost, that's primarily what she's doing now.

C: Okay. Well, I really want to thank you for agreeing to do the interview with me here. Still working at becoming an expert interviewer, but hopefully I did this interview justice.

W: Oh, yeah.

C: [Laughter]

W: You all did a great job, and I'm proud that you all took time out to come out in the field, so to speak, and interview pioneers so you can get it right, you know. We hope that the people will gain something from it, because it was, it was serious. A lot of people lost a lot, lost their lives. A lot of people lost their business and homes and things of that nature, so it was a serious endeavor and it shouldn't be taken lightly.

C: If you had one thing that you could tell a young person growing up here in Mississippi, what would you tell them? How would you inspire them to strive for success?

W: First of all, he needs to be a Christian, he needs to be a member of somebody's church. He needs to learn to live according to the scripture, the Holy Bible. He should become a husband, somebody's husband, somebody's father, and be the very best person that he could to propel manhood and family lifestyle. Good citizenship.

C: Okay, well, thank you so much, again.

W: It's been my pleasure and I hope you will be successful in your career. I know you're going to be great. You're going to make somebody a beautiful wife and a real good businessperson.

C: Thank you, sir.

W: Pleasure. Thank you, all right.

[End of interview]

Transcribed by: Diana Dombrowski, November 7, 2013

Audit-edited by: Sarah Blanc, November 21, 2013

Final edited by: Diana Dombrowski, March 14, 2014