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Interviewee: Jack Kershaw

Interviewer: Ben Houston

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H: It is June 30, 2003, and I am in the house of Mr. Jack Kershaw. Sir, thank you for meeting with me, I appreciate your time. Can we start off with asking when and where you were born please?

K: I was born [on] October 12, 1913, in Carthage, Missouri.

H: How did you end up coming to Nashville, then?

K: Well, my family was in Missouri only temporarily. [It is] a Tennessee family.

H: Could you describe for me the Nashville of the 1950s, given that I'm an outsider both to Nashville and the 1950s?

K: Nashville in the 1950s was in the process really of becoming a city after having been a wartime town. In the 1950s, this was about a five hundred acre farm where we sit, and as you can see when you drove up, it's solidly filled with buildings and little houses and things. That's progress, they tell me; I'm not too sure about that. There was, I think, a beginning flow toward the attitude of the 1960s, but it'd been in the South and in the American culture since the 1920s. You remember the Roaring 1920s, and the 1920s rolled right on into the 1930s, except there wasn't much money to spend in the 1930s. But people still went to restaurants with coats and ties, even up until the 1950s. Now you go into a restaurant and it looks like a collection of ragamuffins. Air travel, at the time, speaking of dress, it was quite expected that you wore a coat and tie to travel on an airplane, but now blue jeans alone is quite sufficient. It's also sort of a cultural attitude that went along with dress-style changes. Everything became more discussible. In the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, you just didn't hardly mention rape in polite company. But there was oncoming influence, of course, of science. You see, science brought in so much like Freud and absolutely unmentionable activities between people of the same sex and all that. The scientific discussions of such was, of course, carried on by educated people who were perhaps familiar with Freud, or probably perhaps not, but they were familiar with second-tier writing of Freud.

H: In terms of Nashville, did you see evidence of this progress occurring in the city, or did it still retain a more rural feel, considering that it was such an outpost for migration from the surrounding counties?

K: I think that the presence of the university here was a part of the scene, and it certainly encouraged people to read the latest discoveries and discuss them all

and that sort of thing. There was certainly a difference between characteristic conversations in Nashville, as opposed to a liberal conversation that you might have in the farming and rural areas of the country, so far as manners and sophistication and that sort of thing are a concern. The level of sophistication and informed conversation and all that sort of thing is vastly spread, what with schools sprinkled all over the state and radio stations and TV stations and that sort of thing.

H: Could you recount how you came to join the Tennessee Federation for Constitutional Government?

K: I was instrumental in founding that organization, and we considered that it was a very important question of the day. Our position briefly was that the government was burgeoning large in an unhealthy way, and that if compulsory segregation was wrong, then compulsory integration certainly is wrong, because both positions involve freedom of association. The judiciary and the country as a whole are still struggling with that problem today. It's called affirmative-action and that sort of thing, and it amounts really to compulsory association, according to people who consider themselves to be wiser than thee. So the Tennessee Federation for Constitutional Government was really defined, in a large extent, by title. We felt that government intervention to the extent of telling people with whom they should associate was very dangerous to social development. Of course, simply abolishing segregation would have been understandable perhaps, but it was apparently ineffable that we went from compulsory segregation to compulsory integration.

H: In other words, the forced mandate of integration as opposed to just making segregation...

K: The Little Rock integration scenes were symbolic and typical. Mr. Eisenhower sent in the troops and he in effect had the troops take a little white kid and a little black kid and bang their heads together; integration.

H: Can you talk about who else comprised the membership in the Tennessee Federation for Constitutional Government? Who joined with you in banding together?

K: I really have very poor information on numbers. How many counties are in Tennessee? I think [there's] ninety.

H: I think it's in the nineties.

K: I'd say that fifty of them had pretty good chapters. Fifty times fifty is what?

H: 2,500.

K: [I'd say we had] easily 2,500 [members].

H: In terms of Nashville, and not necessarily in numbers, what sort of folks were joining the TFCG?

K: It was not a collection of rednecks, by any means, which is the charge leveled at all Southern organizations. There were school teachers, writers, lawyers, housewives and of course. At [a] Tennessee Federation for Constitutional Government meeting, the discussion could be very illuminating and informed. We are supposed to govern ourselves by adherence to the Constitution, but not one in a hundred has ever read it and knows what it says, in the ordinary populace, I'm sure. I'm sure Tennessee Federation for Constitutional Government members have all familiarized themselves with the Constitution and the Declaration [of Independence].

H: So how did the TFCG go about trying to make its efforts to forestall the integration attempts of the 1950s, particularly in Nashville?

K: It was difficult to have a policy-planned program, because it was a proposition of putting out fires, like the situation in Clinton, Tennessee, where our governor [Frank Clement], sort of like Mr. Eisenhower in Little Rock, sent the state guard up to Clinton, Tennessee. [He] didn't have the courage to really be as forthright as Eisenhower, or as boneheaded either. I remember Clinton very well. I was scheduled to make a speech in a public square on a certain night. Well, the night came and the governor had ordered the state guard, with tanks and tear gas and the works, into the town. I determined to go ahead with what I was supposed to do. I was supposed to be in the courthouse, [but] I told everybody just gather here by the front steps, [since] they've locked the courthouse [and] locked you out, even though you're taxpayers, and made my speech. I still have a copy of, I think, if you'd be interested in it.

H: I would be interested in it.

K: I made another similar speech at Chattanooga, and I also have copy of that. I ran into them recently, so you can judge from that considerably. Plus, the Tennessee Federation was most fortunate in having as its chairman Donald Davidson, one of the distinguished scholars and writers of our time. He was a professor at Vanderbilt [and] he was a member of the Southern Agrarians, whom you've heard [of], I'm sure. The Southern Agrarian people were very active in the Tennessee Constitutional Federation also. I was going to name a couple [of people] but I can't, and I guess it'd be better not to anyway. That's, for a college professor, something that might be frowned upon by the [presidents] of their

schools. But you asked what other things we did. We had several distinguished lawyers in our group, and I was not a lawyer at the time, but I organized the law defense for the Clinton Sixteen [sixteen Clintonians charged with violating a federal injunction for keeping the peace] charged with blowing up the school [in Clinton]. It was a difficult case, because it was a bunch of hardly intellectuals who didn't have a very good reason [for] doing anything. We had a team of lawyers, several from Nashville and Memphis and Birmingham, [that helped us]. Ross Barnett, I don't know whether he was governor of Mississippi at that time or not, but he was a lawyer and he came up here. The attorney general of Louisiana, I can't remember his name right now, came up. We made enough of a defense that those people were not shanghaied and they never served any time in jail or paid any fines. They were lectured, I guess, or something else. The legalities of the event, I don't have it at my fingertips right at the moment, but I do remember that much.

H: So would you characterize the TFCG's efforts as more grassroots initiatives or more politically oriented?

K: Both. I think we were certainly interested in grassroots articulation, but that's just the beginning of politics, and without it you don't have politics. We were interested in preserving the constitutional rights of the people, and to do that, we expounded those rights and tried to show where any form of compulsory association was non-desirable in a democracy.

H: What was your relationship with John Kasper?

K: John Kasper was a strange situation. I really considered seriously the possibility that he was [a] double-agent. His ideas were, in a word, based on a dictatorial fascist sort of approach. He may have been well intentioned personally, [but] I don't know, [because] I really never had any personal contact with him. I did oppose his rabble-rousing in Clinton, the very best I could. I hustled back down here to Nashville to see my friend, the mayor Ben West, and I said, Ben, you better contrive some way or another of keeping Kasper out of town, [because] he's going to make you trouble. [Ben West] didn't do anything and Kasper came in and rabble-roused. There were aspects about John Kasper that were to be admired. He was independent in his willingness to stand up for what he thought, but he did not have a very generous attitude in what he thought. On the other hand, he performed a certain service by arousing the citizens of Clinton to make a noise, and the rank-and-file is oftentimes very useful in that field. All in all, he was brought down by justified criticism; [he catered to] an element in the South that was capable only of violence and nothing else.

H: What about the Parent School Preference Committee? Was that allied or linked with the TFCG?

- K: It was [linked to the TFCG]. I'd totally forgotten about it until you mentioned it. The School Preference Committee was simply concerned with the fundamental right of the parent to select a school to which his child should go, within reason, preferably the closest school to his home. I think that plan is in operation today [only in theory]. I think the school bus companies run the schools. Somehow it's considered a great blessing to ship children by bus many miles in order to have a certain racial proportion in the school. All this [is] in the name of the theory that there's no such thing as race, which is a little bit contradictory.
- H: What about organizations such as the Tennessee Society to Maintain Segregation? What was the relationship between groups such as that and the TFCG?
- K: The Tennessee Society to Maintain Segregation was, I think, an East Tennessee phenomenon, and I don't think it amounted anything. They wanted to do what the title said. They had an animosity towards the blacks, whereas the Tennessee Federation for Constitutional Government had no particular animosity towards blacks. Really, we felt that the blacks were being denied a great opportunity to perfect their own schools and education and leadership. All that, they've now lost. The most ironic and amusing [thing], in a bitter sort of way [is that] the first thing that the black groups did when the University of Wisconsin integrated [was to say], well, integration is fine, but we want our own dormitory, and they were getting their own dormitory.
- H: Were there any African-American members of the TFCG?
- K: Yes, there were one or two, not many.
- H: Do you recall who off-hand? I don't know if you feel comfortable giving their names.
- K: No, I don't, because they certainly didn't play an important part, but there were blacks who understood what we were after. You ask about how Nashville was in the 1950s as compared to now. Nashville in the 1930s and during the war, there were black communities, like in all Southern cities, where blacks congregated and lived. There [was] a thriving commercial area on what's known as Granny White Pike, going into town; it becomes 12th Avenue when it gets downtown. There [was] also a thriving black commercial development on Charlotte Avenue on the north side of town. Both of those [free enterprise] developments have been obliterated with housing projects and similar things. Housing projects specifically on Granny White, [and] university expansion and other such things on Charlotte. But the forced integration movement denied, in practical terms, the development of a lot of black business leadership, [which was instead] eliminated or given no opportunity. Of course, blacks have developed a position

through schooling now based largely on merit, I hope, but they're largely limited to a certain level of development by position in companies, and above that, not much.

H: Would the TFCG have supported more resources for African American schools and education under the auspices of being separate but equal, or did you feel that they were equal?

K: Oh no. There were black schools that were understaffed. There were positive good black teachers, positive good white teachers also, as far as that goes, but there was no inclination at all in the Tennessee Federation for Constitutional Government to make their schools second-rate. We wanted to make them just as good as they could make them, and [allow them] to have enough money to do so. We certainly advocated black leadership in that area, as well as other places.

H: I understand that you don't want to name the names of the African American individuals who were members of the group, but can you tell me, for example, what occupations they were? Do you recall off-hand?

K: No, I don't.

H: Would you consider the TFCG effective in accomplishing its goals?

K: Well, we failed utterly, of course. Compulsory integration did occur; we were opposed to that. We were effective in bringing to the forefront reasonable conversation, civilized exchange on the subject, and perhaps prevented some more rabid folks from stirring things up unnecessarily.

H: Why do you think the TFCG was ineffective and failed to accomplish its goals?

K: Well, because the government had successfully integrated public schools, they had successfully violated the idea of freedom of association. They have successfully manipulated, by zoning and assignment and busing, a population in most schools that they consider to be sociologically beautiful. They have deliberately put schools on border-lines between white-folk community and black-folk community so that the school will receive influx from each direction. This all basically and absolutely flies in the face of the idea of freedom of association. It's very unwise [in terms of] productive development, which is continually resisted by both groups, to some extent. There are schools that are supposed to be integrated, but they're not [because black and white students do not mingle within the school – they have separate clubs, etc.]. I'm not too familiar with it, but I understand [that,] in many areas of the north, there are schools that will be solid black. The few whites that go there are lost like wood chips on dark water.

H: I understand that Nashville had a reputation for being somewhat inhospitable to segregationists and the TFCG in the sense of accepting their arguments and carrying the banner of the TFCG. Can you talk about why that was the case? Do you disagree?

K: First of all, let me think about what the relationship with the press, the media, was. The media was cooperative. The only conflict we had with the *Nashville Banner* was that Mr. Stahlman, the owner and editor of the *Banner*, thought that he was Mr. Conservative and he didn't need any help from anybody else.
[Laughing.]

H: Why did he think that?

K: I don't know, pride. He didn't like me in the columns and *he* was Mr. Conservative. Let's run with that fact, folks. [Laughing.] I'm sure that there was some over-enlightened white folks that thought maybe we were antediluvian – yes, yes, there was that sort, but they were generally, like you, from Ohio or New York. You weren't tagged with opprobrium for the fact that you were a member of the Tennessee Federation.

H: I guess I assumed that because you felt that you weren't successful in carrying out your goals, that Nashville was not as supportive as they could have been.

K: Well, that's right, eventually. It was not able to defeat Washington. If *President* Washington had been here, we wouldn't have had that problem.

H: Historians have talked about how violence that occurred in Nashville, for example, the bombing of the Hattie Cotton School, was in the end a very costly blow to the segregationist movement. Would you agree with that?

K: Yes, it was unforeseen, unnecessary, [and] uninformed, but you can't reach out and control the masses. The Tennessee Federation for Constitutional Government [had] no contacts to speak of with the alumni that generated and produced this arson and destruction on the Hattie Cotton School.

H: Is the same true of the Jewish Community Center bombing a year later?

K: What happened with the Jewish Community [Center]?

H: There was [a] dynamite explosion and threats.

K: I don't know [anything about that].

H: In 1958, there was an explosion at the Jewish Community Center in Nashville.

K: The Jewish Community Center?

H: Yes sir.

K: [That was in] 1958?

H: Yes sir.

K: Well, that would be in the realm of another ballgame, you might say. The Federation for Constitutional Government had no animus towards the Jews whatsoever. I don't even recall the event.

H: Okay. Do you think that members of the TFCG would have been willing to close the public schools rather than integrate?

K: Oh yeah.

H: Why is that?

K: Because public schools are basically opposed in theory to the whole attitude of America; it is government intervention into something which is a family matter. We didn't have public schools noticeably until after the War Between the States. Education was desirable so far as the government was concerned, but not its responsibility. No state universities could amount to anything at all, I don't think, before the War Between the States. You had private schools [at] both [the] college/university level and [the] academy [level]. That's the way it should be today, naturally. I know that the public-school hierarchy would shudder to hear me say that, and they will shudder to read it if they ever do, but the best thing in the world that could happen in education today would be to abolish all public schools. The faculty and the administrative people there may be very capable, but they're hamstrung [by] remote and unfeeling orders from Washington indirectly and from the state directly. So give them...you could set up a financial structure that allowed a faculty of, say, West End School, or any school to borrow the money to buy the school and run it as a private enterprise. Then we would have true education. But separation of state and church is a desirable situation, [and] by the same token, absolutely, separation of state and education. It's desirable because the state may not be given the authority to influence the little hearts and minds, as the jurist said, any more than having a state church. Of course, that's all the Constitution ever anticipated. That's what the Constitution talks about. Of course, in those days, they were state churches. The congregation in Virginia was a state church supported by taxes, which is not a good thing, in my opinion. So long as the state does not operate the church by

means of tax money, then we have freedom of religion.

H: Historians who have written about the TFCG comment on the respectability of the organization and their restraint, especially as compared to other segregationist organizations. Would you agree with that evaluation?

K: Who says this?

H: Historians who have written about the TFCG.

K: Yeah, that's correct. The temptation in having such a group anywhere is to excite the masses, rabble-rouse, in other words, and the Tennessee Federation for Constitutional Government avoided that approach. We kept the discussion at an adult level, informed adult level. Yes, I think that's a correct analysis.

H: What was the relationship of the Tennessee Federation for Constitutional Government with the south-wide Federation for Constitutional Government?

K: I know of no south-wide Federation to amount to anything.

H: This was the group that there was a meeting in Memphis in 1956.

K: That's right. Yes, and there was a strong federation, I believe, in Louisiana. It was part- and-parcel and guided by the same objectives. Whether they were successful in their local activities or not, I don't know, but the Tennessee Federation for Constitutional Government was [sympathetic with] that group. In fact, the south-wide [Federation]'s aims was consistent with Tennessee, but there were other groups that were sprouting up all over the South that we didn't know anything about much.

H: Are there any examples you recall?

K: Well, the Citizens' Councils in Mississippi was certainly a Mississippi phenomenon, and they were very active in Alabama too, but generally we were able to cooperate with the Citizens' Councils. Citizens' Councils were very well-administered. I suppose that feelings ran higher the further south you got, that was an element of course, but the Citizens' Council published a paper. They were led by a very well-informed man and the movement was quite to be recommended.

H: So why, in an attitude of cooperation with the Citizen's Councils, did you not have direct affiliation?

K: Oh there was, there was cooperation between the [two].

H: I know, but why that instead of not just becoming a Citizen's Council in Tennessee? I mean cooperation implies two equals cooperating as opposed to a merger of the two.

K: Actually, that did happen. When Dr. Davidson died, or became ill to the point of he could not be active again, the Tennessee Federation for Constitutional Government did join and become part of the Citizen's Council, because the two were quite compatible in structure and attitude.

H: But wouldn't the TFCG perhaps have been strengthened if they had done that earlier? Why didn't that occur?

K: No, I don't think so. They did all they could in Tennessee. The fact that they joined the Citizen's Council didn't alter the degree of activity.

[end Side A, Tape 1]

H: It seems to me that there were a number of different causes that sort of coalesced under the segregationist cause. For example, religious segregation versus states' rights segregation as versus sometimes anti-Semitic folks, and John Birch Society types. Is that an accurate understanding of the movement?

K: Well, as we were mentioning awhile ago, the umbrella of liberal and the umbrella of conservatives spread wide. Some conservatives under the umbrella, some conservatives would repudiate and even look down upon, and the same situation occurs in the liberal camp, too, I'm sure; the militant masses would not be embraced thoroughly, I think, by the intellectuals, so you have to be careful with that sort of tent- spreading.

H: Were there tensions among the segregationist movement because there were such diverse viewpoints?

K: We had to temporize a little bit with some of the folks, that we're not advocating violence and you don't have to make this big to-do and cause mayhem in the streets. Any organization has some disciplinary problems that need to be corrected, but that's what you would expect. Part of the reason to have an organization is to keep the wild man from being turned loose on the streets.

H: It seems like from the readings that I've done of the Tennessee Federation for Constitutional Government that a constant refrain was warnings against violence and the need to maintain law and order. Was that very high on your priority list?

K: Yes, we were insistent on the right of free speech and assembly, [and] that's the

reason we continued with our meeting in Clinton, despite a very grave opposition and physical opposition by the National Guard. But I think you'll find that the words that I used to the populace that night were the opposite from arousing the rabble. I could have very easily swept that group into a charge on the National Guard, but I did not think that that was the correct thing to do.

H: Did you see a difference between the TFCG before and after it was incorporated into the Citizens' Councils movement?

K: No, I don't think so, very little.

H: The reason why I ask is because I saw in the early newspaper counts of the early founding of the TFCG [that] it's often expressed that they're separate from the Citizens' Councils. That was very much stressed.

K: Well, there was certain state pride and "we were first" [attitude] and that sort of thing, I suppose. We had great sympathy for the people in Mississippi and worked with them most of the time, I'm sure.

H: So you don't see a difference between groups like the TFCG and the Virginia Defenders of State Sovereignty and Individual Liberties? You don't see a difference between them and the Citizens' Councils?

K: I don't remember much discussion by the Virginia group. We knew about it and read their literature, but it did not have the immediacy of association that we had with Mississippi being a border to West Tennessee. Virginia was Virginia and we figured they could take care of Virginia; we could leave that to them. The South has always been characterized by certain antagonisms developing between this group and that group and that hero and that hero. I think [there'd] probably be good grounds for saying [that folks had differing opinions], that's why we lost the War. State's righters running around, not realizing that we had to make a joint effort, in a nutshell, and that's a weakness in the South. It may be that a new secession movement might be very reasonable, [in order to] save civilization, if you're going to be launched into [becoming] a world empire, created, really, by President Lincoln, that movement [in] that direction. We entered the War Between the States as a constitutional democracy; we emerged from it as a centralized power with all the trappings and pains and activities, as it turned out, of an empire. We conquered the Philippines and hooked the Spanish and all that. Where we had, before that, the urge of the government generally, was to keep us out of entangling alliances, as you'll recall Washington's phrase. There's a great lesson there, but [President] Wilson managed to get us involved in the European conflict [as a "world power."]

H: But many people argued that, especially in terms of the Philippines and such like

that, there was benefits to spreading Western culture and Western society to those groups.

K: Well, I think the Spanish people will be quite capable of attending to that chore; they're a very rich culture. That's a little bit uppity of us, [to] go over and correct the Spanish. [Laughing.]

H: There was an interesting quotation from you, I think it was in the *Southern School News* and I wish that I brought it with me. This might sort of build on something that you said earlier, but it was something to the effect that you felt segregated schools were necessary for allowing African American culture to flourish unimpeded and separate from white Southern culture.

K: Exactly.

H: Can you elaborate on that, please?

K: Sure. As we mentioned awhile ago, compulsory association is not conducive to development of culture. It's conducive to the destruction of the culture of the integers that you'd forcibly compel to associate with each other. The development of black leadership, which we've mentioned before, was parallel and part of the course of the development of black culture. In forcing blacks to appear at schools and educational activities, we're depriving them of the very desirable aim of developing their culture according to black integrities and black attitudes. Of course, the "one world" philosophy would say that that was inevitable, but the rich European cultures that we have are characterized most distinctly and visibly by the fact that Italian painting is one thing and Spanish sculpture and painting is another. [The] French, German, Hungarian, Polish, Swedish, English, [and] Scottish, are the same way. It's European, but when you get down to specific cathedrals, [you have the] English cathedral, French cathedral, Spanish [cathedral], and so forth. There's a certain coherence to people, and exactly how broad that is, I don't know. There even can be multi-peopled [groups] in a way, like the Byzantium culture. It was distinct and characteristic, but it had certain elements that seemed to be imported, but not really. Where Byzantium stops and Russian begins is sometimes hard to tell. So, in the name of a people's integrity, yes, very definitely, the blacks have been deprived of the opportunity to develop their own culture in America. By this modern development, they were well on their way to doing it, and [they] may still get there; I'm not saying they won't. If there could have been a parallel development of white and black, I think the results would have been much more desirable. There is much of the black idea of art that just does not appeal to whites. Think of their music, think of rap artists. Of course, I know there are one or two white rappers, but there's always some oddballs around. [Laughing.] Folk music today is thought of apparently by a lot of people as being one folk, but it's not, [there is] white country folk and black folk. And there's of course a lot of

difference between some to the white folk music and the other white folk music. Tragic ballads of the Appalachians have nothing whatever in common with the hootin' and hollerin' of some white folk music that's boisterous and loud and fast and stompin'. Folk music of the tragic ballads is another era entirely, [and the same folk can have different moods].

H: Talk a little bit about Nashville's reputation as a moderate city. It got a lot of approbation for its handling of the desegregation crisis and the Nashville Plan, the sort of gradualistic integration of the schools. Talk a little bit about that, if you would. Would you agree with that portrayal of Nashville?

K: I don't think Nashville had any great leadership or innovation. They succumbed to the notion recommended, and demanded, in fact, by the centralized government. I see nothing that should make Nashville stand out. Nashville accepted federal aid to education, which meant federal controls. I remember very well representing a group of parents in Giles County, where they had four or five community high schools, and obviously they were part of the community. I went to one, I remember, and we [could have] had lunch on the gymnasium floor. The windows were not bare, they were hung in drapes by the Parent-Teacher Association and so forth. All that has changed. They built a big consolidated school successfully now. In the lawsuit, I remember negotiating with my cousin, who was a lawyer for the state, and I proposed certain changes could be made [and] we could develop a plan. He said, Jack, we run into rules in Washington. I realized then that Washington was telling those people in Giles County to build a big consolidated school, which bigness [alone] is something to make you hesitate. Bigness for the sake of integrating the black part of the school system was not educational, it was socialism of the worst sort, "we know more than you do," and that sort of thing. I haven't checked on the fate of that big fine school in the center of the county, but I understand that it's not good. You may force mixing, but proper mixing is always voluntary. I don't think Nashville should enjoy any kudos for a far-sighted and modern development solution to the problem. I know too much about what goes on in various high schools, and it's not good. There's a friction. Public education in Nashville is not any better than it is anywhere else, generally, and public education is deteriorating, as we know, all the time. It's closely related, throughout the South, of course, to the creatures that existed in Giles County, where education and learning was made secondary [to forced association].

H: This is a little bit of a side-step, but I would be interested in hearing your thoughts about your artwork and how it represents some of your feelings and how it incorporates your mentality about such things.

K: Well, I feel that art, properly expressed, is a part of a community, in a certain sense. Art is the result of what is around us, and what is around "us" here is not

what is around “us” in New York City or Paris. There should be such a thing as Southern art. Maybe not squeezed down to as close a thing as Tennessee art, but it could be. I have never been able to feel surrounded by abstractions. Art has very little to do with geometrics, if that’s what’s meant by abstractions. Of course, a painting like that [referring to an abstract piece done by Mr. Kershaw], which doesn’t refer to any familiar object at all, is like a symphony. It’s movement and conflict and power symbolized, and symbol is the key. If the painting, even if it is strictly representational, involves a similarization of attitude, then the fact that it is also representational is minor. The portrait of my wife, at the end of the room, I don’t know whether you can see it or not, it is a Southern painting; you would never see that in New York. The veranda overlooking the fields and the dogs and so forth.

H: So its those symbols that make it quintessentially Southern, those representations that are symbolically laden?

K: Well, like that [painting of a] nude lady sitting [there]. If you examine the painting closely, the people in the painting hanging on the wall are discussing her, and she is languidly listening for hoofbeats on the lane, for her lover to come, I think. Well, this gets to be the atmosphere around select Southern mansions, you see. I’m just working on repairing a painting of a “Tennessee Road Gang,” which was still in existence in the 1930s. If you’ve got in the Saturday night drunk tank [meaning, jail], regardless of whether you were colored, you got given a shovel and you were leg-chained and carried out to a road and you dug ditches as a gentleman with a sawed-off shotgun standing by to increase your ardor. [Laughing.] This applied whether you were white or black. It was a forward-looking institution, it was integrated more or less voluntarily. [Laughing.] In that you voluntarily got drunk, in other words. After that, there was a little bit of shoving and nudging. [Laughing.] You’d be interested in seeing that, that’s a Southern painting, “Tennessee Road Gang.” Of course, the church, religion are inextricably interwoven, even tighter than that, genetically bound, into the culture of our society. Religious urge and the aesthetic urge are close kin.

H: I understand that one piece of artwork out, off of I-65, [referring to Mr. Kershaw’s sculpture of Nathan Bedford Forrest visible off of Interstate 65 south of Nashville] particularly got a lot of attention.

K: Yeah, I was accused of being a racist and other things. The liberals, like my friend John Seigenthaler [former *Nashville Tennessean* editor], I’m sure he boiled at that sculpture. Forrest is unjustly maligned. How can you make a villain out of a man who, as a slave trader, was known for never separating family, and his slaves were well taken care of. For one reason, if they had whip marks on their back, they brought less money, I’m sure. His personal bodyguards during the war were black, I know the descendent of one; his quartermaster, in effect,

[was black]; and all these teamsters were black. They were his; they were his slaves. He freed them *before* the war ended, [and] all of them but one remained with him *after* the war. Is this the villain? Is this a nigger-hater? No. He was a great leader and he was a great leader because he did understand that these black men were men, [and] the white men he had were men too. Of course I calculate that about twenty percent of the Confederate army was black, in spite of the fact they never enlisted black soldiers until the very end. They did [enlist black soldiers] at the end. There's a very amusing scene in Richard Taylor's accounting of the war. He tells about how he'd ordered his body-servants to stay behind and then he found himself on the hillside exchanging fire with the Federals. All of a sudden he heard Joe [say], "look ova thah massa, look ova thah, that's where they are!" He said, "Joe, I told you to go back." [And Joe responded], "No sah, I'm right up heah, you need me to help you." Of course all those servants ate in messes, I believe about eight men to a mess. Of that eight men, apparently there was twenty percent [that was] 1/8 [black], they would have a man-servant, and he's the body who went out and washed up the food and cooked it. Of course another error that many people have about the War [is that] they pictured all Confederates as having slaves, [and] maybe twenty percent of [the Confederates] had slaves, and a lot of the times, [it was only] one, two, three, or four. The big slave owners were as rare as the very rich.

H: In terms of the Forrest statue, when they accused this piece of art as being racist or accused you of being racist, how do you react to that? How does that make you feel?

K: It doesn't bother me; I'm used to stupidity. I didn't get offended. I guess I'd be a little bit disappointed if they didn't get a little bit outrageous and call me racist. But yes, I can tell a difference between black and white. If you are such a racist that you don't know the difference between black and white, you're insulting your black brother, because he's different and he's proud of it and he wants to develop that way. Let's not reply to a racist.

H: What's your sense of the rise of Black Power in the 1960s? I get the sense that there's some sort of similarities between Black Power wanting to maintain their own culture and wanting to remain separate from the whiter culture, which somewhat echoes some of what some segregationists might argue.

K: That's right. Black power, like any other power, can be a dangerous development, but so can proletariat power. We as a humankind have not thoroughly solved the problems of proper leaders and the rights of the masses. Some kings have done a marvelous job and some democracies have done miserably. It's a very large human problem that's still with us and I think it'll be here for quite awhile. There must be some balance, some solution, but looking out over the world, I don't see much sign of it.

H: What haven't I asked you, that perhaps I should have asked you, in terms of your view on Nashville and race relations in the 1950s and 1960s? Do you have any particular memories or anecdotes?

K: I think the one thing that has been forgotten generally is that, when there was great stratifying of the races, that a really warm relationship between the races was widely experienced in pre-integration days. I'm talking now about the 1930s. In countless ways, one of the events in our family, and my wife's family, was an annual trek to Aunt Susan's grave to put flowers on it. I've had blacks working for me that are trifling as you can get. I've had blacks working for me that I'd trust with the entire house and family. I had one named Rufus, for instance, who always chewed tobacco. I remember wrestling with myself, if something happened to Rufus, and mouth-to-mouth resuscitation was necessary, would I? Yes. By God, I would. So the myth of rampant hard-hearted hard cruelty – that has occurred to some extent – there are always some cruel people in the world, but fortunately they're in the minority. That warm relationship between the races did exist in times of slavery and in times of segregation. Segregation, by the way, was a Northern invention. Did you know that?

H: How so?

K: In the North you had sun-down towns, antebellum. In the South, you didn't have any sun-down towns; of course, you didn't need any such things, because they were all over the town. But, after the War, the abolitionists performed, I think, one of the cruelest things against suffering blacks by freeing them abruptly, with no preparation [and] no concern for their [ability or lack of ability to make responsible decisions as well-informed workers or citizens and voters]. [Note: Mr. Kershaw added the following anecdote as an elaboration of what he said in the original interview: When President Lincoln was confronted with the problem, he told a story about an old farmer who planted a field in potatoes to feed his hogs. He planned to turn the hogs into the potato field "come frost." His neighbor said "what's gonna happen when the ground is frozen?" The old farmer answered, "root, hog, or die." You remember Mr. Lincoln never wanted to merely free the slaves; he wanted to transport them either back to Africa or to South America. His attitude toward blacks was the same as the Illinois towns that imposed sun-down curfews for blacks.] Segregation was adopted from those Northern sun-down towns. A concept that applied to the Southern's War-ravaged society.

So, of course, the superficial accusation is made today that post-War segregation was a wicked and cruel thing. It was a method of getting along. It's like the young and the old having different rules. You're supposed to be a little bit deferential to the older man, and he's supposed to be a little smarter than you are, even though you think you're smarter. So I think that the sort of thing you're doing, if it results in some sort of mediation and communication between the rigid

liberal and the hide-bound conservative, then maybe you're doing good in the world. I'll show you that Road Gang painting and I'll show you what I'm working on right now, when you're through. I don't mean to rush you or anything.

H: Do you have any concluding thoughts or memories that you'd like to share in addition?

K: I haven't got anything wrapped up to go.

H: As you pointed out, a lot of the people that I've interviewed have been more of the self-proclaimed liberal school. Is there anything that I need to know to understand the other side of the equation, especially when talking about Nashville of the 1950s?

K: Yes, I think you have to remember that a liberal is a dedicated reformer. He is a do-gooder, and do-gooders can be not adopted wholeheartedly. You have to be very careful about a person who assumes that he's able to distribute "goods." He can do it, and it's been done, but you can also develop a harmful disease of self-righteousness, holier-than-thou, and all that sort of thing. That's the problem. To be concerned about the welfare of very disadvantaged people is perfectly commendable. What's not commendable about it is to imagine that you're the only one in the world that's concerned and that yours is the only solution.

H: So how would you characterize the other side of the equation then, in such terms that you've characterized the liberals? How would you characterize the conservative position, especially the racial conservative?

K: Well, I think you can have the cruel man, the arrogant man, quite likely call himself a conservative. He's not conservative, in the best sense of the word, any more than the self-serving idiot do-gooder is generally characterized as a liberal. Cruel individuals exist, and they can be white or they can be black. The cruel white, even if his activity is limited to a stupid arrogance of "I know more than anybody else," he's still considered conservative. It's the reverse of the do-gooder. He knows more than anybody else, and often times, the master of the plantation is a fool. If he is, that's very unfortunate. People can go off to Europe and leave a man to be an overseer from Ohio [laughing] who had a big whip. Or he may be very civilized. There's certainly lots of things that we don't understand yet, and the miserable part about it is that we're sure we understand everything.

H: Well, with that thought, we'll finish. I'm sure that once I leave here, I'll think of about fifty questions that I want to ask you.

K: Well, you can come out again.

H: All right, thank you. This concludes the interview.
[End of Interview.]