

Fall 2015

Oral History Civil Rights

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HIST 155, Fall 2015 / Ruth Yepez

Student Interviewer's Name: Ruth Yepez
Interviewee Name: Matthew James

Time and Location of Interview:

The interview was conducted over the phone in two different sessions on October 26, 2015 and November 10, 2015. It lasted a cumulative of 1 hour and 10 minutes. At the time of the interview, Matthew James was in his home in Waldorf, Maryland. The interviewer was in Southern Adventist University in Collegedale, TN.

About Matthew James:

Matthew James is an African American citizen, born in Brunswick, Georgia in January 1947. He stayed there the first 18 years of his life until he graduated from high school. He then went away in Georgia to start a college education in Fort Valley State College in Fort Valley, Georgia, and graduated in 1970. By September he joined the Coast Guard and spent 26 years there. He was married in 1975 to Bonita James. They had two girls who are now married. From Kindergarten to 2nd grade Mr. James was Baptist, until he was baptized into the Seventh-Day Adventist church sometimes in 1954.

Interviewer: Ruth Yepez (RY)

Interviewee: Matthew James (MJ)

RY: Mr. James just to get started, tell me a little bit about how you became a student in a segregated school? What was the process of enrollment?

MJ: Well, after kindergarten...well of course, in Georgia in the 1950's before the 1954 desegregation of school there was no option. You had to go to a predominantly black school. There was no way to go to the white schools. The process was you go to the black school or you die. It was only after 1954 when Brown vs. Board of Education that the Supreme Court said "separate but equal" schools was against the constitution. So after 1954 is when it all started. Ruby Bridges in New Orleans and a lot of things. My county didn't start that until 1964, my senior year in 1964, they took about 20 students from our predominantly black school to go to the white school to be integrated.

RY: Did the students get to choose? Or was it the school's decision?

MJ: No, I guess the school staff picked the best temperament, the best attitude, they thought could handle the pressure of going to this white school for the first time. And you know, they were seniors going to this white school. I never went myself because I was a senior, graduated from a predominantly black school, but all of my sisters and brother's after me, they went to integrated schools. I never had integrated education at all in my time.

RY: What about in college?

MJ: In college there was a white professor, but there was no white student, it was still a predominantly black college.

RY: What was your family life like? How many siblings did you have? Were both your parents employed at the time?

MJ: Yeah, my dad was a self-employed automobile mechanic and mom was a practical nurse at a hospital. And I have 3 brothers and two sisters and they're all younger than me, I'm the oldest.

RY: You were baptized into the Seventh-Day Adventist church. Do you recall how the church was involved in the civil rights movement? Can you describe their involvement?

MJ: Because I left there, I left high school in 1965 and I think the church, you know, there has never been any white members. Because there has only been two white churches in the whole town, there's a black church and a white church. I think it was about by the 70's that they start doing things together. Inviting each other to come over to do a program with other church. So, all my days when I was there, up until I was 18, in 65, there was not whites or anything at the church.

RY: Where they ever involved in the civil rights movement?

MJ: Other than voting and supporting, getting black police officers, and black members of the city council, that's as far as they did. No one, you know, marched, or carry placards or things like that. It was more exercising the right to vote.

RY: During segregation, many revolutionary activists appeared. Did you have civil rights heroes that you admired or looked up to?

MJ: Well, I think for me it probably started, looking at the news to see when George Wallace, the governor of Alabama, wouldn't let people go to University of Alabama. There was James Meredith, who was a part of it. Of course Martin Luther King, Rosa Parks, were heroes. Malcom X, Stokely Carmichael, the Black Panthers, Mary McLeod Bethune. To me a hero was Eleanor Roosevelt because she had friendships with the black community, with the ladies.

RY: As a student of a segregated school, can you compare your school with the schools attended by the white student only? Was the level of education equal?

MJ: That's a tough question. I cannot judge that at all because I never went there. You know, I was satisfied with my school. Let me tell you something else, too. The whole time I was in first grade to eighth grade, we never got new books, we always got second hand books from the white school. Yeah, we got, after the whites had used them for a couple of three years, then we got the books from them. That so called "separate but equal" situation, it wasn't like that. No, we never got new books, it was always after the whites had used them for a couple years, a couple of three years. And I need to tell you that my time

was completely segregated. I remember the white and colored water fountains, the JC Penny's, and Sears, and stuff like that. In 1960, when I turned 13, my mom and dad, they gave me the talk. About why there was white water and colored water, and why we went through separate entrances. And I had that talk, they had that talk with me about how to stay alive in the segregated Jim Crow South. That was 1960, you know, when you had to have that talk with your son to keep him alive. I can see mom and dad they were, that was a tough thing for them because I was growing up getting bigger, hormones raging, and they wanted to keep me safe.

And at that time, sometime probably near my 18th year, that we finally got a black doctor, and black dentist in town, we finally started getting black medical professionals in town.

RY: Were you aware of the Black Power movement, how did the movement affect your thinking about race? Did they change you mindset at all?

MJ: Because I always had (paused) I never had self-esteem issues, always proud of my hair, no matter how long or short it was. The only thing that it made me aware of, how we were being treated. It made me aware that, you know we're going through separate entrances, but we're paying the same amount for the same amount of stuff. We couldn't sit in the restaurant, you know, we'd have to get food out the back door when we went to a restaurant. So, those were things that I was aware of. And you know, check this out! I could remember vividly at a camp meeting in Florida, when a white minister from the Florida conference came over, and I have remembered this all my days, he said when we get to heaven, he's going to come on you all's side, to listen to the music. And to me, that was absurd. In heaven, there's not going to be any white side, black side, all that kind of stuff. That was my awareness that even in the Adventist world we got people who don't get it.

RY: Did you associate with other people who were white? Did you have any white friends who disagreed with segregation?

MJ: Ruth my dear, I never had any white friends. I didn't know any teenager who was white. The only white people I saw were in the grocery store, so I had no contact with white young people, none, zilch. Remember this is Georgia, prior to 1965. I mean, those were the days of whistling at a white woman, or trying to date one, you gonna die.

RY: There was a movie that was played in the white house, *The Birth of the Nation*. Which led to the revival of Ku Klux Klan. You were aware of that?

MJ: Whooo! Yeah, I was aware of that. That was the movie, in the early 1900's by D.W Griffith. Oh! That kind of got the Ku Klux Klan back, motivate them to be mean. Yeah, I heard about it, never seen it, well, I've seen excerpts from it, but I wouldn't watch that.

RY: How did your family feel or respond to legal separation, do you recall conversations with your family about the subject, which you did answer already, but could you elaborate?

MJ: They had to deal with it because you know, they had to buy things, had to go to the store, so they learned a way to deal with it. Have your dignity, but I mean, they didn't have the power. All they could do was just try to be safe and get along.

RY: Can you recall what they would specifically speak to you about?

MJ: When I was older, my dad, who fought in WWII, told me that I shouldn't be here. And I said "what do you mean by that, dad?" He said when he was on ships going to the Pacific, they stopped at Hawaii to get motivated to look at what had happened in Pearl Harbor. And some white guy said some stuff and other guys from the military said some stuff to him, and my dad went back to the ship to try and get his rifle because he was going to go back and get ready to shoot somebody. And the members of the crew, of his company, they tackled my dad and wouldn't let him leave the ship and they took the gun away from him. So, obviously even in the military, you're fighting the enemy, you have that racism stuff going on. That's the only thing he said. And then my dad had about four brothers, one brother made it to Japan and he married a Japanese woman. I have cousins that look like Tiger Woods (laughing). They have the Asian look, and they're dark. I have two Asian cousins, Frank and Harry James. And my dad's oldest brother made it to France during WWII and he fell in love with a French lady, but he was afraid to bring her back to the United States. He thought that him, being from Georgia, things would not be right and so he never married her. He wrote to her for a long time, but of course, you know, after all that absence away. So he never got married and he never had a chance to bring that lady in. That's the only side, the only tales that I know of. And I need to also tell you that my family, the James's, were descendants of slaves, I have this book here at home called A History of Jones Creek Baptist Church Long County, Georgia. 1810-2000. It has the names of the black slaves that were a part of the church, they were in the balcony. And one my ancestors, Alexander James, which is my great, great grandfather, his name is listed. And my dad's side, there's a lady named Patsy Baggs, his great, great grandmother that was in that church. So I have that kind of connection with the slaves in Georgia, at this church where the whites allowed the slaves to be in the church, but in the balcony area, you know?

RY: Was this the Baptist or the Seventh-Day Adventist Church?

MJ: No, this was the Baptist church. The Jones Creek Baptist Church.

RY: Do you recall of any individuals in your hometown in Georgia being discriminated against? Whether it was in public places, professions, education, etc?

MJ: Well, because I was young at that time and because the people, you know, there were no, there were very few black business man at that time that I knew of. Other than mechanics, barber shops, hole-in-the-wall type restaurants, and juke joints, there weren't any major-oh! There was a taxi cab company, but. (silent)

It was going on, but I never heard too much about it. It was always "hush-hush," mom and dad whispering at night type stuff. I heard of people getting beat up because they were trying to date white women. And then of course there were some girls who end up

pregnant with white babies, I'm not going to say any more. Things were going on, but it was not for the benefit of the males, it was for the benefit of the white males.

RY: You mentioned that your siblings attended integrated school. Were you happy that they were able to attend an integrated school or would you have rather had them attend a segregated school, because of the racism and taunting going on?

MJ: My siblings never said that they had any issues. They were six or seven years younger than me, and so by the time they got to school in the 70's, most things had died down. And the whites either fled to their parochial schools or their private schools, and so it kind of died down. Eventually, well, one of my uncles, my mom's brother, was a teacher in a black school, he never was able to go to the white school. But as integration came about, he became the vice-principal of the white school that he never went to. How ironic is that? (chuckle) Yeah, he retired from the white school as the vice-principal and he never went to that school. He couldn't go to school when he was there, he was in high school during the 40's. But the last 5 years he was the vice-principal at the school he could never go to. (laugh)

RY: You mentioned you never had self-esteem issues, it is very empowering to know that because in this age people are still struggling with self-esteem. We are living out the effects of the past. How was it that you were able to stand your ground and keep your self-esteem so high?

MJ: Thank you for that question! Thank you so much for that question! Because the black teachers in all my classes, from first through twelfth, they always were positive. (Referencing to what his teacher's said) You know, times are hard, but you can make it, it's possible for you to excel. They talked about George Washington Carver, they talked about Booker T. Washington, they talked about all the people who made it up. Marian Anderson, the opera singer who, Roosevelt, they wouldn't allow her to sing in DC at the Constitutional Hall. So she made her husband, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, so she can sing at the Lincoln Memorial, right in front of the Lincoln Memorial, similar to where Martin Luther King Spoke. And so we always, we had a black history month. We had that, so we were aware of the other history, that's not in the books. And so we had that encouragement to know about jazz, and Duke Ellington, and Bessie Smith. We read, the black writers from the Harlem Renaissance, Countee Collin, and James Weldon Johnson, and (pause) can't think of it right now. Oh! The poets! that part of it we had that education that was not in the books, we had enlightened teachers that always encouraged us that we can excel. You know, that black is beautiful, and that, so we did have that! I think that's why I didn't have the self-esteem issues because I knew there were things in the books that they were telling us that were not true, and I can see it, you know?

RY: Wow, Mr. James that's amazing. It's encouraging to know that now, the Harlem Renaissance, the poet, etc. are in the history books.

MJ: Yes! Yeah, but those books in Georgia didn't have that! That's part of the history that they didn't want to include to keep us down, you know? When you have the Jim Crow laws, and people that believe that, yes. But that was a great question, yeah that's why

because they didn't want us to stand tall, do your best, look good, yeah, that was the point of it. Teachers didn't want us to speak Ebonics. You ever heard of Ebonics, like ghetto talk? (chuckle) Yeah, the teachers were always trying to get us to say, you know, you have to speak the King's English, you have to be able to write, have to do math, so that you can excel and not take the back seat to anybody. And all my days, we sang the national anthem and also what is called the Negro national anthem called "Lift Every Voice and Sing." Yeah, that was a part of it, too! Yeah, those were the kind of things that the teachers said we had, we needed it, they had that side. What was not in the text book, they supplied.

RY: The national Association for the Advancement of Colored People was founded by both blacks and whites. Two examples would be W.E.B Du Bois and Mary White Ovington. Were you ever a member, or had a friend who was a member? Do you recall if there were white and black members aside from the people who founded the organization?

MJ: Well, in my town, I knew the president of the organization, he was a Baptist minister. And all the members were black. Remember this is Georgia 1960's so there probably wouldn't be any white members unless they came from the North.

RY: Martin Luther King was born in Georgia, the same place you were born. Were you ever able to see or hear him in person? How did he specifically influence you?

MJ: I heard his speeches on the radio or on T.V, but I never got to meet him himself. The closest I came, in college, after Martin Luther King died, one of his lieutenants, Reverend Ralph Abernathy, we went to a protest march, where they were integrating the schools, around a place called Newnan, Georgia. And Ralph Abernathy was speaking because they wanted, you know they were integrating the schools, they were going to get rid of the black principal, and just have all white staff, and he was there protesting. The college students, we went up there and were a part of it.

RY: Dr. King was assassinated in 1968. Do you recall in which time in your life this event took place? Did it influence your hope or advocacy for civil rights?

MJ: I was in college. Oh Yes, it did! It was kind of dashed for a while. You know, when a leader dies, things kind of flounder, but things just moved on. Everybody was super sad, you know, it was a sad thing.

RY: How did your family, especially your parents, feel?

MJ: They felt bad, you know? It was like more of the same, bring us down, taking the best of us, that kind of thing.

RY: Did you agree with Martin Luther King's philosophy of nonviolent protest? Would you have had a different approach?

MJ: No, I would not have. Because I realized that, you know, we would be out gunned. And following the Mahatma Gandhi model that was the only way to get sympathy, to get

anything, the non-violent way. I was, you know, sort of anti-black panthers. About the same time that Martin Luther King was getting there, the 60's, the panthers were talking about armed struggle. I couldn't see that. I couldn't see grand moms and I couldn't see Rosa Parks with a gun in her hand that just didn't fit.

RY: Did the Black Panthers have a lot of supporters? Seeing as to how most people agreed with Martin Luther King's non-violent approach.

MJ: They had more supporters in areas where there were black majorities, in the inner city, California where it wasn't too rough. You didn't have many Black Panthers in the South because you would be killed! Yeah, the only support would be in the cities where there were black majorities in the neighborhood. You couldn't do that in the South there was just no way. And if you're a Christian, the only way is the non-violent way, you know? Shooting somebody is not compatible to how Christ would do things. Not an option.

RY: When President Kennedy, who made it clear in his speeches that he was a civil rights supporter, was assassinated, were you and your family hopeful that Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson would continue to advocate for Civil Rights? How did you feel when he finally signed the Civil Rights Act in 1964?

MJ: I'll let you know, I was probably tenth or eleventh grade when Kennedy was shot. To me that was the first time I realized that, you know, death was real. Everybody is crying, everybody is sad. You know, I was thinking, what's going to happen to America, the dignity of Mrs. Kennedy. How Lyndon B. Johnson, you know he was a Southerner, but he didn't act like a Southerner, he followed the policies of Kennedy. So I was encouraged especially when he had Martin Luther King in the Oval office. There were picture in Life magazine, every magazine of Johnson and King sitting down talking. That was to me, it said a lot, that was encouraging. And to the family, too.

RY: After *The Birth of a Nation* was played in the white house and triggered the revival of the Ku Klux Klan, were you afraid to pursue a love interest of the different race?

MJ: I wouldn't even consider dating a white girl, there was no way. My dad and mom had given me the 411 on that kind of stuff.

RY: Would it have been different in the North?

MJ: Yeah, it would have been different in New York City, Detroit, California, Chicago, but not Atlanta. Not in my little small town, Brunswick, Georgia, no way. The only people who having fun was white men. They would have clandestine relationships with black women from a power force stand point, you know? I guess you know, that things opened up after June 1967, when Supreme Court said "I can marry whoever I want to." So after '67 my thoughts turned a little different, but I can safely say, I never had a white kiss or a white hug. Until I was an old man at church. (chuckle) Not that anything like that was on my mind, ok? That was not on my mind.

RY: Can you describe your experience riding public buses before and after it was outlawed?

MJ: My experience was, at the Greyhound bus station, there was the black entrance and the white entrance, and we rode at the back of the bus. I can remember taking a train trips to Atlanta, there were no restroom facilities for the black folk. You couldn't buy your own food, you had to have a shoebox with your chicken and your food in it. And they periodically would stop along the tracks and they'd allow you to go out in the bushes and do your business and come back.

RY: There were restroom stops and restaurant stops for the white passengers?

MJ: Yes, the poor men could serve them, but they couldn't eat there, and neither could the black people who bought tickets. You had to carry your own food. See, I grew up in an area where you couldn't eat at the restaurants, you had to go to the back door and they'd serve you food out the back door. You could not sit in the restaurants, you know? I'm that old, dear. (chuckle) And I grew up in the South. Believe this or not, I went to college and about my sophomore year, when I came back home in a Christmas holiday, was the first time I went to a theater where there were white people in the theater. We had a black theater that was about a block from my house where we saw movies, we could not go to a theater with the white people.

RY: How was your experience after it was outlawed and you were able to sit wherever you wanted? Was it still difficult?

MJ: No, only every now and again you could tell that people were taking forever to wait on you. And you know that that was what it was all about, they took a long time to bring you service.

RY: Do you think that we can finally be done advocating for civil rights today in 2015? Or do we still have a long way to go? Can you differentiate times in the 1960's and now, have we made much progress?

MJ: I think we have made tremendous progress since the 1960's to now. There's no if's and's or but's about it. The only thing I still see lingering is the political power. How districts are gerrymandered to dilute the black folk. And how they do that, that part of it is not, they don't have that right. And now with these Voter ID laws and other things, yeah producing IDs and all that kind of stuff. That's more the poll tax and all that kind of stuff that they use to do to keep the black people and poor people from getting a chance to vote. That's the only vestiges I see right now in the political process, how thing are gerrymandering and joint districts so that black vote is diluted a lot. I see the fault. And that's usually in what we call the southern countries, southern states, where the Supreme Court Justice have relaxed a lot these voting restrictions and things like that. I don't think, in that respect, you don't see many black representatives in these areas where you know there are a lot of black people living. That's a political issue that the voters will have to deal with. But when it comes to accommodation, who you're going to marry, where you can live, and the freedom to go where you want, I think that part of it is completely open.