Interview with
CLEVE McDOWELL

Kim Lacy Rogers and Owen Brooks,
Interviewers

Rogers: This is an oral history interview with attorney Cleve McDowell, taped on November 1, 1995, by Kim Rogers and Owen Brooks in Greenville, Mississippi.

Mr. McDowell, do we have your permission to tape this interview?

McDowell: Yes, you do.

Rogers: And at the end we'll give you a consent form to sign so that we can deposit this in the archives of Tougaloo and at Dickinson.

McDowell: Okay.

Rogers: Is that all right with you?

McDowell: Yes, that's acceptable.

Rogers: Okay. We're doing a lot of history, so we're trying to get through the stretch of social change through people's lives. Could you tell us about your beginnings? Were you born in Sunflower, or where were you born?
McDowell: Okay. I was born in Drew, which is in Sunflower County, 1941, August 6, 1941. Basically, it was a farm community, rural. We lived on a plantation, on the Sage Plantation. That was a big name at that time.

Rogers: So your parents were farmers?

McDowell: Yes, that's correct.

Rogers: Were they sharecroppers or tenants?

McDowell: Basically sharecroppers. Well, I know, sharecroppers and tenants is about the same thing. The bottom line is that you worked all year and you probably didn't get anything at the end of the year. You had what they called a settlement, but you probably were lucky if you broke even.

Rogers: The commissary system.

McDowell: Well, we never really had a commissary as such. I guess we weren't that far in the country. But basically you charged stuff to the man and he gave you credit for it at the end of the year when he tallied up all of the cotton that you had picked and so forth, and it was always very close, a few hundred one way or the other. And if you, in your settlement, didn't earn anything or didn't have a profit for that year, then they would always loan you something to carry you over for the next year.

Rogers: Getting you further in debt.

McDowell: Right.
Rogers: How many were there in your family, how many children?

McDowell: Okay, I have older brothers and sisters, but basically in the household where I was, there were five of us, two boys, three girls. My father had five kids by a former marriage, which would be my half brothers and sisters, so you had three boys and two girls who were always older, because basically there are ten of us in all.

Rogers: Was your family a storytelling family? Did you have family stories?

McDowell: Oh, yeah. My father died at the age of 103, and he knew everybody and everything that had happened. His mother lived to be near 100, too. She remembered during, you know, like the Civil War. My father's name was Ferge [phonetic] McDowell. His mother's name was Sally McDowell. In fact, she hid in the chimney when the Yankees liberated that area. I think they were in Arkansas at the time.

Brooks: How old did she live to be, Cleve?

McDowell: We didn't have an accurate record, but we think it was something like 98.

Rogers: But she could remember slavery and the Civil War?

McDowell: Oh, yes. She was a former slave.

Rogers: What kinds of stories did they tell?
McDowell: Well, like I said, basically anything you wanted to know in terms of the farming community, what happened to black people, the various efforts at clearing what we call new ground, and even the putting in of highways and pipelines and even electricity and so forth. He knew everything.

Rogers: What kinds of things did your family tell you about I guess the way white people treated black people in Sunflower?

McDowell: Well, I guess--now, I'm not a baby, either. I'm 55 myself, 54. But just a whole run of everything that happened with plantation life. Well, the mule era, where you farmed with mules and all of those things. They came up through all of that. Just you name it.

We basically always had one of these country shacks, but ours was always fixed up. We had newspaper on the walls that we replaced every year. It wasn't like somewhere you look out through the floor and see the ground and up through the top and see the air and all that, because we always kept it fixed up. We always kept the grass scraped out of the yard, and we all kind of farm animals--hogs, chickens, geese, ducks, whatever. Then we really thought we were rich when we got that wallpaper that you could order and glue. We really thought we had made it then. But we lived a typical farm life.

Rogers: But you had plenty to eat?

McDowell: Yeah, because we basically raised it. My father and mother believed that, you know, you need to have your stuff there. We never went hungry or anything like that because we raised chickens and hogs. In the off season, you used to call it laid by, when you laid your crop by, we would then go and chop wood. We'd have to cut firewood for the winter and so forth. And later on, they started giving us coal. You would get a little pile of coal that had to last you the whole season. And years later, into the early fifties, we got a kerosene stove, which was a big thing then.
Of course, I guess typically, my mother was an excellent cook. She knew how to take things and survive off it. But we never had a problem with actually going hungry or anything like that because we always had food, primarily because we raised it and so forth.

**Rogers:** And you had cows?

**McDowell:** Oh, yeah, cows. I used to hate that. It was my job going getting the cows. You know, you send them out in the morning and you have to go get them in the evening for milking and what have you. It was typical farm life.

**Rogers:** What kind of things did you hear in the community about race or about white people or about race relations? We've gotten an earful about everything from family lynching stories so far to just stories about various things that would happen in the community.

**McDowell:** Well, of course, you know, pre-Emmett Till it was just expected--well, you knew about atrocities that happened to black people if somebody said the wrong thing or did the wrong thing or insulted or some white person became dissatisfied with someone. You know, obviously it was tantamount to a death sentence, because you could be killed on the spot. Over at Drew, we had a notorious marshal, town marshal, named Dewey Ross [phonetic], who apparently just slaughtered people at random for any number of years, until some time later--I'm thinking in the late forties or early fifties--he killed some white guy and then they finally sent him to Parchman.

**Brooks:** Was he the sheriff?

**McDowell:** He was the town marshal.
Brooks: In Drew?

McDowell: Yeah.

Rogers: He got stopped--

McDowell: When he killed a white doctor's son, as I recall, who was in the military.

Rogers: That doesn't sound like a smart move.

McDowell: Yeah, right. Well, it wasn't. But he had killed so many people, apparently unchecked. And, you know, at the time, you really weren't thinking civil rights, as such. You know, civil rights, as such, didn't really come into the Mississippi Delta until like Emmett Till's case, and then we started hearing about things and thereafter. So really, prior to that time, the Southern way of life was, whatever the white man said went, and you relied on your boss for protection.

Rogers: I guess people like the sheriff were--

McDowell: Right. In other words, the traditional saying was that, if you could stay out of the ground, he would keep you out of jail. There was supposedly safety in being on a certain person's plantation and what have you.

Rogers: Meaning if you stayed alive, stayed out of the ground?
McDowell: Right. In other words, the police and all didn't bother you as long as you--well, back even during that time there was a tremendous problem with black-on-black crime, because, you know, we had blacks killing blacks, even as it is today. But there was no such thing, really, as civil rights at that point, no movements or anything, and I would guess that the only thing that might come close to something like that was listening to the Joe Louis fights or something on the radio. That's when everybody gathered to listen to whatever local radio there was. And obviously blacks didn't make too much of a fuss about that, because it would have been tantamount to bragging about a black person whipping a white man, and that just wasn't a thing to do.

Rogers: When did you start working? You must have started working at a very early age.

McDowell: Well, I guess I came up at the right time, in the right place and so forth, because like by '58 and '59 and '60, you know, things were jumping all over. We'd been influenced, obviously, by the Emmett Till case and then the Little Rock school integration and so forth. So everything was moving, and I was entering into high school, and we were well read and we were getting a better group of teachers, teachers who were beginning to say more than had been said in the past. We were getting teachers who were telling us what is supposed to be, even though they weren't necessarily out leading any parades or anything. With TV had come in then and the news media, we were becoming a part of the nation, I guess. We were getting more information.

Then in the summer of '60, I went to Jackson State, and we were fulling involved in the movement by that time.

Rogers: So you went to Jackson State and became a part of the Jackson movement?

McDowell: Well, yeah. That put me on site, where everything was going on at that time.
Rogers: Jerry Ward, who is also in our project, said that he remembered you from Jackson State.

McDowell: Uh-huh. Like I said, everything was going on. Everybody who was anybody at one time or another came through Jackson. That's how Tougaloo came in, because as a state school, we had to do our dirty work out at Tougaloo's campus, because we had a president, Jacob Reddicks [phonetic], who just absolutely wouldn't tolerate any civil rights activity on the campus.

Rogers: So you had to pose as Tougaloo students?

McDowell: Well, at the time, as bad as it seems, the president and the school administration probably didn't know us as well as they probably should have, because the student government association was actively involved in just about every movement that was in progress, but even when they looked at us, they didn't even know us by recognition-wise. They didn't even recognize a lot of the leaders. But at the time, you know, you were on the thread of losing your scholarship, say like if you were on scholarship or something like that, and you would actually be expelled if you were caught doing something against the system.

Rogers: Were you on scholarship?

McDowell: Well, not in the sense that we are today, but I was on scholarship, but it's nothing like what you have now. We called scholarship working in the cafeteria, cutting grass, painting buildings, washing the buses, and all of those things, work aide and what have you.

Rogers: What kind of role did you play in the Jackson movement?
McDowell: Well, I guess initially-- [Telephone interruption]

You realize by that time all of the civil rights organizations were active--the SCLC [Southern Christian Leadership Conference], the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People], the COFO [Council of Federated Organizations], and everybody was--you know, that was a focal point. The student government association and the student leadership played a support role. We had committed ourselves to playing a support role with the Freedom Riders, meeting them at the train stations, the bus stations, and what have you, the various protest marches. We were just fully engulfed in all of that--voter registration, the boycotts of downtown Jackson, the riding on the bus, that whole situation, getting people on the police departments. Everything was wide open at that point.

Rogers: So you were with the student government association at Jackson State?

McDowell: Right.

Rogers: What are your most vivid memories from that period in Jackson?

McDowell: Give me that again.

Rogers: What are your most vivid memories of that period in Jackson?

McDowell: Like I said, everybody who was anybody had been through there at one point. Medgar Evers was head of the NAACP. We worked out of his office on Lynch Street in the Masonic Temple building. All of the national leaders, Dr. [Martin Luther] King [Jr.] and everyone, had been through at different rallies. Like I said, you name it. We were running around. We weren't playing any major role, but I carried a whole lot of briefcases and did a whole lot of support things that later on I was able to build on.
Rogers: Do you remember the people you worked most closely with at that time?

McDowell: Like I said, Medgar Evers was head of the NAACP, and we had a student branch out on the campus. We were involved and worked out of his office every day. James Meredith was president of the political science club. I was vice president. His Ole Miss [University of Mississippi] integration efforts, and later on mine, came out of those activities.

Rogers: Out of the political science club and the movement?

McDowell: Yes. You know, like I said, there was emphasis on--well, we were out to get equality in education, wherever. You see, public accommodations, you will remember at the time that not even the hotels, the big hotels in Jackson, were integrated, the movie theaters, the public library for that matter. The public libraries weren't integrated. All of these things were targets. We had everything before us. The bus stations here, you still had the two sides of the bus station. The train station and all these things, the water fountains in the public buildings, the courthouses, all these things still had the "colored" water fountains and all of that. So everything was before us at the time.

Rogers: Do you remember Freedom Summer, when that came in in 1964?

McDowell: Yeah.

Rogers: What are your memories of that?
McDowell: You know, that was, I guess that was a combination of I guess everything that we'd been working for. It was basically a massive effort at voter registration and just everything, breaking down the remaining public accommodations barriers. I mean, just a massive effort that had just sort of come together, sort of fallen in place because of the times. Prior to that time, we had had the riot at Ole Miss and the people killed there and what have you.

Rogers: And [Medgar] Evers had been assassinated.

McDowell: Evers had been assassinated. The three civil rights workers from Philadelphia had been killed. This time frame set the pace for everything. They were grabbed out of the movement, in fact, I guess you'd say.

Rogers: Pardon?

McDowell: They were grabbed out of the movement, which probably did as much to help as it--you know, the people who killed them probably never thought that they would actually help the movement, as such, but the national attention and what have you that that got really pushed it.

Brooks: Could we go back to Sunflower County just for a minute before we go to Jackson State? Where did you go to elementary and secondary school?

McDowell: I went to the Drew Public Schools, except it was the Drew Colored School, and we had one building that housed one through twelve, and we got a high school. I was a member of the first high school graduating class in the new high school building in 1960. Prior to that time, we'd been housed in the original school building, which now somehow came out to be known as "Little Red."
Brooks: The new high school, you graduated from the new high school?

McDowell: Right. I was the first graduating class. We went in in the fall of ’59. It was one of those that was built as part of the separate but equal thing, so we got one of those high schools.

Rogers: Before that, how many students had been in the one-building school?

McDowell: Well, we generally had a lot of people at the elementary levels, but as you came up—in fact, my class, at the time, had the largest number. I think it was thirty-three of us, I believe, in our class. Prior to that time, there had been like twenty seniors, and even as few as three. Like in the like ’57, ’56, ’55, you would have anywhere from between three and ten graduating seniors, mainly because as you got older, you had to drop out and do farm work.

Brooks: Do you remember the early efforts to integrate the white high school, Cleve?

McDowell: Yeah, but that came substantially later. The Carter children and others who went to the high school and integrated that, that was much later. But at the time, there was absolutely no effort. It was solidly segregated up until the time I graduated. In fact, this is where the thing comes in where you would get the old books and things where you actually had the white kids' names in them and the leftover--

Brooks: The hand-me-downs.

McDowell: Yeah, leftover everything, which obviously was intended to at least have gone in part to us, but we got everything passed down from the white system, and, you know, that was just the way it was.
Rogers: I went to a poor grade school in rural Florida and we got books that had lines and lines of students below the end of the sign-up sheet.

McDowell: Right, exactly. The other thing, too, that we had in the Delta, we had the split session, where they let you out in the fall to work people's cotton and pick cotton and so forth, so we generally went in the summer. Like we had summer school and then, like July and August we'd be in school, and then we'd go back probably November. We would be out probably Thanksgiving, near Thanksgiving every year. It would be Thanksgiving before you could go back to school. So that split session, we were caught up in all of that, too.

Rogers: How did you feel about that growing up?

McDowell: Well, at the time, we obviously didn't know any better. We did what we were told to do and so forth. But obviously it was a horrible thing. But at the time--

Brooks: You'd go to the field.

McDowell: Oh, yeah. It was time to harvest and cultivate, plant. You'd chop cotton, those things, and it was just expected of us to do it. At that point, we never really realized how wrong it was or how bad it was. But we could still see the white kids going to school, and I guess it effected us, because things like football and basketball, you were obviously off season with those things, and it would be readily apparent that something was wrong with the way we were going to school because of the sports and what have you. Plus, you would be watching the white kids ride by you in busses.

Rogers: Did you find at Jackson State an outlet for these kinds of feelings?
McDowell: Oh, yeah. Jackson State was an urban university, and you had what we consider radical professors there, people who taught us political science and all of these things even over the protests of the conservative administration.

But we also, even in high school we still had some professors who had--well, first of all, the ones who started coming in from Alabama and from Tougaloo really changed things, and it got so bad that our superintendent stopped letting the principal hire teachers from Tougaloo, and the ones who were there, I remember well, couldn't even wear their sweaters, their fraternity sweaters from Jackson State and Tougaloo. The principal was told not to even let those people wear those things. That was considered threatening. But at that point, like '58, '59, and '60, we were inundated with people who just plain knew better, and they were teaching us better and we were responding.

Rogers: So the teachers from Jackson State and Tougaloo were seen as being really incendiary for you all?

McDowell: Right, as well as the ones who would come in from Alabama.

Rogers: From Tuskegee and Alabama State?

McDowell: Right. Tuskegee primarily. We had gotten a number of them. Our principal had gone to school in Alabama and he had systematically hired a number of people from Alabama.

Rogers: So you were being given other ideas, obviously, then?

McDowell: Yeah. We were brought into the mainstream. We were being taught what the rest of America already knew.
**Rogers:** Do you remember any of your professors at Jackson State? Does anybody stick in your mind teaching political science from a more radical perspective?

**McDowell:** Yeah, Dr. Eubanks [phonetic]. Like I said, there were so many, but there were great thinkers. Dr. Eubanks was one that sticks out. I don't remember his first name offhand. He was a senior professor and had such renown credentials that he could say what he wanted to and the president and other faculty members couldn't do anything about it. Dr. Rogers [phonetic], who later on went on to become president of some university, I think somewhere in Kentucky. There were just so many of them.

**Rogers:** Who, again, were giving you different kinds of--

**McDowell:** Right. And then there were people like Dr. McCoy, the wife of the one that the McCoy Building is named after. We just had so many good people. Miss Alexander--well, [Margaret] Walker now--the writer/poet, *For My People* lady.

**Brooks:** Margaret Walker?

**McDowell:** Yeah, Margaret. Well, she was Alexander at the time, but Margaret Walker. What is it, Margaret?

**Brooks:** She was Walker, Margaret Walker.

**McDowell:** Okay, yeah.
Brooks: Her last name is Alexander.

McDowell: Okay, right. But she was there. Like I said, we just had so many great professors. Some lady from Vicksburg named Jane Ellen McAllister [phonetic]. She was renown and was one of the first black women to get a Ph.D. in the country, and she was just untouchable.

Brooks: Was she at Jackson State?

McDowell: Yes.

Brooks: What was her name?

McDowell: Jane Ellen McAllister.

Rogers: So these people were being what you would call--

McDowell: Yeah, they just basically told it like it was. You know, they just basically allowed us to catch up with the rest of the world in terms of politics and the right to vote, the need to know why we were voting and what our basic rights were and why we weren't inferior, all these things. They were just very adequate, over the protest of the administration, because the administration obviously wanted to please downtown. They had this big thing, too, about turning money back. Every colored college president tried to turn money back every year to show how good of an administrator they had been.

Rogers: And they were getting underfunded.
McDowell: Right, from the beginning.

Rogers: From the beginning.

McDowell: But every year there was a contest between the three black colleges to see who could turn in the most money.

Brooks: While you were at Jackson State, did you go home summers?

McDowell: Yeah, we were back and forth, like I said. We, in fact, went all over the state from there. All of the major things that were going on, like Natchez and down Charles Evers' way, the Fayette Movement, all of that, then all the way back up to Greenville, all of these things, Meridian. Wherever there was action, we were there.

Rogers: Were you involved with a lot of the SNCC [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee] and CORE [Congress of Racial Equality] people?

McDowell: Yeah. Everybody just basically worked together. In fact, we were young people. In the old days, you'd have so many buttons on, you didn't really know what you were.

Rogers: Who do you remember most from the SNCC and CORE folks who were around?

McDowell: Like I said, all of them were here. Jon Lewis, Julian Bond, Lafayette [phonetic]. Just about everybody. Diane. All of the people who were--the Nashville people came down. Just everybody who was
active in the state was on hand. This was back when--well, I guess this was when Dorsey came in and started doing things, too. Medical center Dorsey.

**Rogers:** L.C. Dorsey.

**McDowell:** L.C., yeah. We started meeting people like her, you know, and later on in those later years, the Fannie Lou [Hamer] operation, June Johnson over at Greenwood. That whole group of people just sort of emerged out of these movements.

**Rogers:** A bunch of local leaders, you're talking about.

**McDowell:** Right. Charles McLaurin from Indianola. And then a lot of us, too, later got into the Head Start and the Poverty Program circuit. That was a vehicle that a lot of us operated through, as well. And, of course, in Sunflower County we had a large Poverty Program operation, and that was an ongoing thing for a long time. We had rival poverty programs, the one put in by the system and the one put in by the people, and that's another story by itself.

**Brooks:** We've gotten a lot of that.

**McDowell:** Old CDGM [Child Development Group of Mississippi] operations.

**Rogers:** Were you involved in CDGM?

**McDowell:** On the edge of it. I was young and it wasn't until I got out of college and law school and so forth that I really got into the Poverty Program circuit.
**Brooks:** When did you go to law school, Cleve?

**McDowell:** The fall of ’63. That's when I went to Ole Miss.

**Rogers:** Were you the first black law student?

**McDowell:** Yeah, in the law school. Actually, it was the summer of ’63, technically, because I enrolled in the summer. I went the summer, and I got thrown out in the fall semester.

**Rogers:** You got expelled?

**McDowell:** Right.

**Rogers:** What for?

**McDowell:** Having a weapon on campus. Later on, I went to Texas Southern.

**Rogers:** Did you finish Jackson State in just three years?

**McDowell:** Yeah, I finished Jackson State in three years.

**Rogers:** Why did you decide to go to Ole Miss?
McDowell: Well, you know, it was a movement thing. We were trying to integrate the school, the Alabama schools and the Arkansas schools. School integration was seen as being something necessary to get full equality. That was going to be the great savior for us. As I said, Meredith had gone into the undergraduate school, and various ones of us had wanted to do other things, and that was why I went to the law school. People like Alexanders [phonetic], he was supposed to go in with me. We went to get him that night, and his mother cried and carried on. I think he had his bags packed, literally, and he couldn't go.

Brooks: Who did go with you?

McDowell: Nobody.

Brooks: You went by yourself?

McDowell: Yeah. We had a dozen people who--

Brooks: Who said they were going.

McDowell: Right. And I wound up going by myself. Of course, at the time I was brave. We weren't scared of anything. We would take on the world. We were militants, as such. We didn't believe the white folk would kill you then, but we know better now.

Rogers: I was going to ask you--

McDowell: Oh, we were ready. We were ready to. It was a winner take all. We weren't taking any back seats.
Rogers: What was it like when you went to Ole Miss?

McDowell: Oh, you know, the whole hostile atmosphere. It was the height of racial tension. We just had the Ole Miss riots. See, I was involved with Meredith back and forth that whole period of time. Everything that you heard on TV, it was just that bad, and worse, if you were actually there.

Rogers: How were you treated by the students?

McDowell: Well, at that point, most of them knew it was hands-off, but you still had the heckling and the isolation. In fact, when I moved into one of the dormitories, everybody else moved out. You had all of the hostility and threats and what have you that normally accompany a school integration. And all these people now who say that they were there with me were probably there throwing rocks or something.

But keep in mind, we had the marshals and the U.S. Army there at that time, so it wasn't until I got in trouble later, when I was there by myself. But with the Meredith time frame, both of us were there, we had the Army and the marshals and all of that. But then they just packed up and left after Meredith left, and then that left me there by myself.

Rogers: What was that experience like, being by yourself?

McDowell: Oh, I mean, like I said, it was as bad as you could imagine, but at the time, we felt like we had to do it. It was a sacrifice that not only me but other people were making. Lucy in Alabama and Hamilton Homes, that I was telling you about the other day, that died. There were people who were doing this all over the country, so it wasn't just something that I was the only person doing. It was something that we felt that we had to do.
**Rogers:** Could you talk about getting in trouble with carrying a gun.

**McDowell:** Well basically, when the marshals were there we had protection and what have you, and I guess you could say I was one of the original militants. I wasn't about to let anybody catch me on the drive back and forth to Drew situation and run me off the road, because they would follow you and honk at you and all of this stuff anyhow. But if some of them had tried to grab me in a bathroom or walking down an alley or something, they probably would have had--they would have gotten an adequate response. But basically, at that time we had a gun in the car going back and forth to home, which was not unusual. The college kids had all kind of deer guns and everything you could imagine in their rooms mounted on walls, and several of them had even shot each other, so that wasn't a big deal. But basically, I was just singled out. Of course, they probably saved my life by putting me out, because, you know, the summer after then--see, Medgar Evers was actually assassinated while I was at the university. Then the summer after, then the three civil rights workers down in Philadelphia. Any other number of people were killed at various points in between there. So they probably saved my life.

**Brooks:** In the summer of ’63, you went up to the law school?

**McDowell:** Right.

**Brooks:** Did anybody else come in the fall?

**McDowell:** Me.

**Brooks:** Just you?
McDowell: Right.

Brooks: You went back in the fall?

McDowell: Uh-huh.

Brooks: No other black person?

McDowell: Uh-uh. All these people that were committed--

Brooks: Where was William Miller?

McDowell: Miller and Anderson and all of those guys didn't come until years later.

Brooks: Is that right?

McDowell: Yeah. Like I said, these people who were supposed--that's one reason why like I used to get in trouble with them all the time, because they would be taking credit for all of these great things. They didn't come until it was safe. That's the bottom line. When Reuben Anderson and Miller and all those guys got there, it was safe. Integration was accepted, because the undergraduate school was well integrated and the schools across the South and the country were fully integrated, or certainly substantially integrated as compared to what had been.

Rogers: How did you feel when you were getting this treatment at Ole Miss?
McDowell: Well, you know, the thing was, it didn't bother me, because I believed in what I was doing. It was just something that had to be done. We were taught at that time, you know, "Forgive them for they know not what they do," and we just basically recognized that it was something that had to be done and that we felt that we were right and dedicated, what have you. And the people who were hostile and the George Wallaces and the Ross Barnettts and all of those, it was just us versus them.

Brooks: Was there a story concerning you, Cleve, our bishop, the Episcopal bishop, was the Protestant chaplain at Ole Miss when you got into that incident?

McDowell: Yeah, probably was.

Brooks: He became bishop in Mississippi. His father was a preacher, too.

McDowell: I think I know. I remember you talking about it, because they were active with Meredith and with me.

Brooks: Right. These names just fade on me, but I think he, I don't know if he wrote a book, but I know some of the books, they covered him pretty heavily in all of the initial civil rights writings, like Dr. Silver's book.

Brooks: *The Closed Society*.

McDowell: Yeah. And some of the other writers had covered him. I think I may have traveled to the March on Washington with them.
Brooks: Is that right?

McDowell: I believe I did.

Brooks: In '63?

McDowell: Yeah. And there was always this thing at Columbia University we used to go to. I've forgotten what it was, but they'd have students from across the country would come up there, and they used to take me to that thing, too.

Rogers: This was the Episcopal bishop?

McDowell: Right.

Brooks: He became bishop later. He was the Protestant chaplain at Ole Miss when Cleve was there.

McDowell: Right.

Brooks: I'll think of his name in a minute.

Rogers: So he was actually a sympathetic guy.

McDowell: Yeah, the religious community, I guess, because he had been friendly toward Meredith and that was a connection that was already established, and basically you had to rely on people like him.
Rogers: One of the things that I've found really interesting in our work here in these communities is that--I did some work in New Orleans for about ten years, and it seems like in Mississippi what you had small communities that are really magnificent communities of liberals in New Orleans, but mostly out of the religious community.

[Begin Tape 1, Side 2]

McDowell: The large hierarchy down in New Orleans, and they always got better support that we did. Now, in Jackson, you probably had some support from people I'd guess you'd call liberals, the college circuit and so forth. But you just didn't have a whole lot of these Delta farmers claiming to be liberals. I mean, let's face it. And there was a reason for it. The people were just as tough on them as they were on us. Anybody who purported to be a liberal got the same treatment that we got. Even at Ole Miss, there were a number of people beaten up, cars destroyed. On several occasions, when people would talk to you or something, they'd go back to their room and all their things had been thrown out the window, the stereos and things like that. So there was retaliation against people who talked to you or who were friendly towards you, and certainly anybody who dared to support you. They were put on the same list that you were.

Rogers: So the closed society operated very well.

McDowell: Oh, yeah, uh-huh.

Rogers: How did it happen that you got thrown out? Did somebody just find the gun in your car or--

McDowell: Okay. Well, somebody, I think, probably--well, they knew I had it, because you know how the network goes, and someone supposedly saw me put it in my pocket or take it out of my pocket or something
at the car. But the bottom line was that when I ordered the thing from the catalog--at the time, you could order from catalog--and it came to the railroad station or wherever it was over to Cleveland, my name stood out just like anything, and it was orchestrated all the way up.

**Rogers:** So the station master or whoever was taking--

**McDowell:** The PDs and the other people, they knew what was going on.

**Rogers:** They knew all of the black people who had guns?

**McDowell:** Well, I wasn't the only one who had guns, because, you know--but what I'm saying is, you know, in the school situation, that was the only thing that made it peculiar. But a lot of black people were defending themselves, or would have defended themselves, if it had become necessary. Everybody wasn't just meek and humble and totally nonviolent. At a point, we defended ourselves. You know, the Vernon Daimers [phonetic] and people like that shot back. It wasn't as though we were just like sheep being led to slaughter.

**Rogers:** We've talked to a number of folks whose families had weapons.

**McDowell:** Oh, yeah. My daddy had a double-barrel shotgun that hung on two branches that was always loaded. And, you know, the old night rider thing. If they had come to our house, they would have had a go-for.

**Rogers:** So when they found this, they just of bopped you out? Did they expel you then?

**McDowell:** Oh, yeah. I think I was arrested. They called the county sheriff over and I was arrested, and then they fined me something, fifteen dollars or twenty-five dollars or whatever the fine was for having a gun. And
then we had the bogus administrative hearing. There was a federal lawsuit, you know, which the NAACP just
didn't pursue past the district court level, because they could have won it if they had pursued it, but they just
backed off.

**Brooks:** Did they send somebody to the hearing?

**McDowell:** Yeah, Derrick Bell [phonetic], who later became a federal judge. See, our other cases had been
Motley, Constance Motley [phonetic] had handled--and Thurgood Marshall had been involved with the early
phases of some of these cases that got us into Ole Miss.

**Rogers:** So Bell was ready to take this case?

**McDowell:** He was the lawyer that actually--see, there was a court order that ordered me admitted, and he
had done the actual court work. I was admitted by court order from the beginning. You know, that was a dog
fight from the beginning.

**Rogers:** What did you do then?

**McDowell:** Okay, then I think I worked for the NAACP and every civil rights organization that there was.
I was on the Chicago staff, branch, NAACP staff. I left there and enrolled at Texas Southern, I think, in '66,
and I graduated from Texas Southern in '69, I believe. Then I came back here. But in that interim period,
we had been all over the country to wherever there was something going on.

**Rogers:** What kind of school was Texas Southern at the time?
**McDowell:** It's the largest black law school, outside of Howard, in the country. In fact, there ain't but two or three. I think there was Southern. Well, actually, it was Howard, Texas Southern, and Southern University. Those were the only black law schools in the country. Because Texas Southern grew out of the separate-but-equal thing in Texas, the Sweat [phonetic] case and all of that. It was the largest black university in the Texas system.

Of course, while I was out there, we had the riots and the policeman killed, and I testified in Congress. I was the president of the student bar association. I testified before that nut from Arkansas, what's his name, those hearings, those riot hearings. I testified in Congress. I presented the school's case up there. It just seemed like wherever I was, there was action there.

**Brooks:** Wasn't Leslie out there when you were there, Leslie King [phonetic]?

**McDowell:** No, they came later. They came much later.

**Rogers:** How was this law school experience. This must have been an improvement over Ole Miss.

**McDowell:** Oh, yeah. Like I say, it was black and Spanish, but it was--

**Brooks:** I just remembered the name. Duncan Gray [phonetic].

**McDowell:** Yeah, right. It was a movement-type law school, because, see, the great lawyers, your black lawyers, were teaching us the things we needed to know to challenge civil rights cases and to do what had to be done from a legal standpoint. So it was a whole new ball game at that point.

See, R. Jess Brown [phonetic], you wouldn't remember him, but he had graduated from Texas Southern, and I had worked with him for a while in Jackson, too. But that was probably why I went to Texas
Southern, because R. Jess Brown had gone to Texas Southern in order to practice law in Mississippi. He was one of the original three black lawyers in the state.

Rogers: Is he still alive?

McDowell: No, he died a few years ago.

Brooks: Carsey Hall's [phonetic] dead, too.

McDowell: Yeah, right, all the three. Jack Young, Sr., R. Jess Brown, and Carsey Hall were the original three black lawyers, and all of the civil rights cases had to have one of them attached as local counsel. So when all the people from Harvard and everywhere else came in here--Derrick Bell, Thurgood Marshall, Connie Motley--all those people had to attach themselves to one of these three lawyers in order to represent people in the state.

The significance, in my case, was that you had to pass the bar in order to practice law, unless you went to the University of Mississippi. The University of Mississippi had diploma privileges, and, of course, you could not get into the university because it was segregated, and you couldn't pass the bar unless they wanted you to. So they had effectively blocked out-of-staters and blacks from practicing law in the state, and there were guys from Harvard and Yale who were flunking the Mississippi bar. I'm talking about white students, geniuses, brilliant, and they couldn't pass the Mississippi bar. It was a wipe-out. You only passed the bar if they wanted you to.

The significance of my case was that once we had integrated the law school, that meant that we could then get diploma privileges just like the white students were, and a few years later they changed it and made everybody start taking the bar.
Rogers: Also, wasn't it Jack Harper who just read the law.

Brooks: He never went to law school.

McDowell: Jack Young.

Rogers: Jack Harper was over in Sunflower.

Brooks: Harper, the chancellor clerk at Sunflower County.

McDowell: A lot of people did that. Until recently, you didn't have to--

Brooks: They had the apprenticeship.

McDowell: Yeah. You could study under somebody. You didn't have to attend an accredited law school until recently here. You could read law under somebody and then pass the bar and be certified.

Rogers: Which you could do if you were white.

McDowell: And connected, yeah.

Brooks: Jack Young did that.
McDowell: Yeah. He worked at the post office, and he did that by studying under some white lawyer that had the connections down there. Of course, they never envisioned him being a civil rights figure at the time. It was intended that he would do divorces and these kinds of things.

Rogers: And he got swept up or he got caught up?

McDowell: Well, you know, there's no way to avoid it. See, at the time, like Ferris [phonetic] Street, and there was a Jackson, there was a black, I guess, hierarchy or black society, black leadership, upper echelon, whatever you want to call it, but Ferris Street was thriving. You had the dentists and the lawyers and--

Brooks: Undertakers.

McDowell: Yeah, undertakers.

Brooks: M.D.s.

McDowell: Yeah, doctors from way back. There was really a lot of powerful people, when you look back on it, in Jackson, and you had people who had education in their families for a hundred years. It wasn't as though everybody was ignorant farmers there. Some of those families had gone back a hundred years and had educated people in the family for generations. You know, the Alex Haleys weren't the only people. We had people of that magnitude in Jackson, and there were people that were fairly wealthy by those standards, people who owned property and what have you.

Rogers: When you graduated from law school--
McDowell: In '69.

Rogers: What did you do then?

McDowell: Okay, I came back to Mississippi and got involved in everything again. I started working for Coahoma Opportunities, which was a community-action program. Then from there I went to a thing we called the state Head Start Training Coordinating Council, TCC, which was a conglomerate that was intended to be the training arm of the Head Start programs in the state, but it was an activist kind of organization that the Head Start directors had set up statewide.

Rogers: What do you remember from these years?

McDowell: Like I said, there again we were all over the state and wherever there was a boycott or a--well, we had this thing with the Poor Gibson [phonetic] case, where we didn't--selective buying became the thing. We couldn't say boycott then. But we had, basically, voter registration and public accommodations, integrating public accommodations. This kind of thing was the big issue then. The thrust was on economics. We had shifted sort of gear-like. We were trying to set up economic bases in the black community.

Rogers: It sounds like in Mississippi among a lot of areas the War on Poverty worked the way it was supposed to, the way that the radicals who talked about maximum feasible participation of the poor.

McDowell: It was a tremendous asset. It was the first real money we had.
**Brooks:** Mississippi had an acknowledged civil rights movement going on with indigenous people. We had some outsiders. And insofar as they were active, and they were quite active for a period of time, they saw to it that Poverty Program agencies, for they were able to for a time. Not long, but for a time.

**McDowell:** Yeah, before the state. See, initially these programs had to come in through colleges, Mary Holmes and places like that, Tougaloo and other places. The state government would not approve of these programs.

**Brooks:** The governor had veto power.

**McDowell:** Yeah. And see, the governor could block these programs from coming in.

**Brooks:** So they only way they could come was through an institution of higher learning.

**McDowell:** Right.

**Rogers:** Which is really interesting, because I remember from some of the Delta Ministry papers I've looked at that John Bell Williams was--

**McDowell:** Oh, yeah. See, he was governor, but we had these awesome fights with him. He consistently vetoed everything. Now, some of them were terrible. We had some awfully managed programs. But by and large, the governor tried to stamp them out, and we had these confrontations all the time. We would schedule a program. He would order all of the state people not to participate, like even the health departments and the welfare units and all of these things.
My office, my job was to get him overridden when he would veto a program. The agency that I represented, it was our job to get an override from the secretary.

Rogers: Secretary of HEW?

McDowell: Yeah. He could override the governor's veto, he or she. It was always a he, though. But that was my job to get John Bell Williams, get an override, and we would put together a massive effort every time. We got it down pat. He could be overridden like in record time toward the end there. We knew just who to call, and it would just be expected to be overridden.

Rogers: How did you feel about this period where you were working with the poverty agencies? What do you remember that doing for you?

McDowell: Well, see, the Civil Rights Movement didn't have any built-in resources in terms of money resources. The Poverty Program allowed us a source of funding. The economics were there that would allow us to do what we were trying to do. Civil rights never generated any money for most of us. Now, some people wrote books and things and hustled and got over. Some of them--I'm not calling any names, but had relatives assassinated or what have you and they made it based on that book. By and large, there wasn't any money in the movement, as such, for most people. So the poverty programs gave us an economic base.

Rogers: Did you see many people improve themselves, learn things, through the Poverty Program?

McDowell: Oh, yeah, there's no doubt about it. Probably the Head Start program did more for the general black population than you can ever imagine, because it sort of, not only the educational thing, but it bridged the cultural gaps. There were children who had never seen commodes and who had never eaten at tables with
forks and knives and silverware. It had done so much, it did so much for people who otherwise wouldn't have gotten those things. You know, nutrition and health care. Just basically we were rural farm-type people who just didn't know anything. We were just out there on a limb. In fact, in Drew the housewives fought the program because they didn't want their cooks to leave.

**Brooks:** The domestics.

**McDowell:** Yeah, the domestics. It was going to take them away. The farmers didn't want their farm labor taken away. In fact, several plants--I'm told that the plant Baxter tried to locate in Drew and the farmers made the people buy the land back that they were supposed to have obligated and all of that.

Even, in fact, Delta State was supposed to have been in Indianola. There's a college street there with the pillars still designed where Delta State was supposed to have come to Indianola and the politician rose up and blocked it, even after they had acquired land and stuff. They didn't want wild liberal college people in their town, and Delta State in Indianola and Baxter in Drew, can you imagine how that would have shifted the things for Sunflower County? But those old reactionary people killed the county in an effort to keep us poor. That's about right, keep black people poor, as well as whites, because there were a lot of whites in the same category. In fact, there were more whites, probably, numerically in the same category. But we had totally obstructionist people running the county, and that's still the case in a lot of instances. We have that carryover now. We're still the most plantation-minded of the Delta counties.

**Rogers:** It says a lot about the racial and class attitudes that these people would block economic development which would further--
McDowell: Oh, yeah. But see, now, their economy was cotton. Cotton was king. This guy from Drew rode a book. That's where that thing came from, cotton was king, and it went nationwide. [Senator James]
Eastland was the--

Rogers: [Senator John] Stennis.

McDowell: No, Eastland in terms of the Delta. Stennis was always urban. But Eastland took care of all of these white farmers here in the Delta, and they controlled the politics of the Delta. That's why we don't have four-lane highways. We're arguing about four-lane highways and stuff now. The other people were getting four-lane highways and grants and things like that. The white politicians blocked all of that. The city of Mound Bayou got more grants than probably Jackson did. The city hall in Mound Bayou was built with grant money, and it's equivalent to any city hall in the various cities, the middle-level cities. But these obstructionists who controlled the government, and you take a guy like Eastland--you've never been to Doddsville, have you?

Rogers: I drove through it.

McDowell: Okay. But there wasn't a building standing on Main Street in Eastland's home town. The only thing he ever did for anybody outside of his farm friends was supposedly help to get a rural water system there. That's all you can really see that he did for the whole community, and now it's just nothing there. It's just a corner store and a Stop and Go at the intersection, and then you've gone right through.

Rogers: It's almost like what we used to call economic development--planned underdevelopment.
**McDowell:** Well, you know, cotton and farming controlled everything. Most of these Delta towns had farmers on the city council. In Drew, farmers were the mayor and board members up until the early sixties, and that farm influence kept the town down. You know, their interests were farm related and not urban development.

**Rogers:** So Head Start really helped up the--

**McDowell:** Oh, yeah, the whole Poverty Program. It's no doubt about it. Just statewide, I mean. It was a savior from an economic standpoint.

**Brooks:** It upset the economy of the Delta.

**McDowell:** It did, definitely.

**Brooks:** Black people weren't supposed to be making those salaries they were making in Head Start agencies

**McDowell:** Uh-huh.

**Rogers:** Jewel Williams said last week in that thing for Mrs. Devine, I said something about the Head Start, and she said, "Oh, yeah, that was our salvation. That got us out of the kitchen." And that allowed them to educate their children.

**Brooks:** And continue their own education.
McDowell: Right, because, I guess, parent involvement and that whole of continuing. See, we set up programs for people to be certified. You know, that came later. But all of these people who taught in Head Start didn't have much formal education, so the public school teachers really were at that time just completely basic requirements. Most of my high school teachers--my elementary teachers, rather--graduated from Valley after I graduated from high school, and I'm talking about a dozen or so of them finished Valley after I had finished high school. All of the elementary-level teachers never had degrees.

And so the Head Start people were just ordinary parents, ordinary people, who had to go in and learn all of the educational skills and the--

Brooks: But they became politicized at the same time.

McDowell: Right, exactly. In fact, the old Hatch Act was there to keep Head Start people really from running and actively participating in campaigns, political campaigns, all those things.

Brooks: How long did you work for the Poverty Program?

McDowell: Lord, let's see. From maybe '69 into the seventies, '73 or '74, somewhere in there. Then I shifted to Legal Services. From the Head Start thing, I shifted to Legal Services.

Rogers: Why did you do that?

McDowell: Because by that time I had passed the bar and was actively involved in legal stuff.

Brooks: Couldn't join any white law firms.
McDowell: Right, exactly. Exactly.

Rogers: Legal Services was a training ground.

McDowell: Yeah.

Rogers: Which is probably another reason why.

McDowell: Yeah.

Rogers: There was so many attacks on it through the [President Richard] Nixon years.

McDowell: Yeah. And see, in the old days, it was doing so much. It brought these local governments to their knees. All these restrictions were put in later about you can't do this and you can't do that and you can't do this. I tried to help them in Cleveland a year or so ago, and you couldn't do nothing. I mean, just the most basic thing that people need. They had a list of like divorces, bankruptcies, and name changes. It's so narrowly restricted that it's almost useless. The things that people need done for them, by and large, now they can't do anymore.

Rogers: Like landlord/tenant disputes.

McDowell: Yeah. They've taken the guts out of the program. Anything that opposes the system, you almost can't do it.

Brooks: Where was your first job with Legal Services?
McDowell: The Jackson--

Brooks: Central Mississippi?

McDowell: No, Mississippi Bar Legal Services. That was the one where the bar tried to get in on the action. And then I went to Clarksdale.

Rogers: So you were with North Mississippi Legal Services?

McDowell: Yeah, it was North Mississippi. It was a monster. It had all of the Legal Services units north of Jackson. That's the bottom line.

Rogers: What kind of cases did you do there?

McDowell: Oh, at the time, you know, we were doing everything. I did the three jail cases, the three new jails. The new jail in Tunica, the new jail in Quitman County, and the new jail in Sunflower County were all cases that I did through Legal Services, you know, coming out of complaints by inmates for just doggish conditions. They were just unreal the conditions. Like the Tunica jail, it was just unreal. You're talking about a dungeon. And the thing was so bad in Quitman County that the sheriff applauded when we filed the lawsuit. He had asked for a washing machine. They gave him a number five tub or something and a washboard.

Brooks: In a box.

McDowell: Yeah. It was really horrible. The conditions were just unbelievable.
Rogers: So you were able to have inmates sue the system.

McDowell: Right.

Brooks: I could show you the little building in Greenville right now. Do you remember it, Cleve?

McDowell: Over by the railroad tracks. Yeah, yeah. The bars and things are still there. You can still drive by there and see it.

Brooks: Horrid looking. It was the county jail.

McDowell: And Drew still has, we still have our little building there. It's just a concrete wall with a little fence around it, but we still have ours. It's part of the Water Works operation now.

We had a guy, Dink Fleming [phonetic], when you got to the jail door, you'd better run in, because he had these cowboy boots and he would help you in. Later on, he became a pretty decent person after the movement and after getting shot and two or three other things. Some black guy emptied a Winchester in him, and he still lived.

Rogers: And he got religion?

McDowell: Yeah. Well, I'm saying he turned out to be a much better guy later, after some of us were on the board.
Brooks: There are a few that got reconstructed. Yeah, I saw it. They really found out what life was really about.

Rogers: Well, also seeing how the political situation was changing.

What other kinds of cases did you do?

McDowell: Like I say, school integration cases, all of those elementary schools and they were closing some and merging. Just everything controversial that came up, we could do it through Legal Services. EEOC [Equal Employment Opportunity Commission] complaints. Just everything you could think of. We were just virtually unlimited.

Rogers: In New Orleans, the big case that nearly shut everything down was when some Legal Services lawyers defended the Black Panthers.

McDowell: Yeah, I can imagine that. You know, like I say, we didn't have all those restrictions on us, and we were in control of the operation. We had more authority, more control. But the system quickly realized what it had created and what was happening, so they tried to take that back.

Rogers: After you did Legal Services, what did you do?

McDowell: Primarily, I've been in private practice. Now I'm the public defender for Sunflower County. It was a job that they tried everybody that they could find and then gave it to me only when they had to.

Rogers: How many black lawyers are there in Sunflower County?
McDowell: Well, basically, Carver Randall, McDaniels, and myself. Probably three of us.


McDowell: No, not at all.

Rogers: What kinds of changes have you seen in Mississippi over this period?

McDowell: Well, there's been obvious progress, because we've just plain taken things. Nobody has given us anything, but we have just taken positions and taken authority. I guess within the legislature, the job that the black legislators are doing, the reapportionment and all of that, the judicial system, you've got record numbers of black judges, you've got record numbers of black legislators, not to mention the local elected officials. It makes a big difference. The supervisors, the mayors, and city councilmen, the congresspeople, or men, congressmen, all of these things make differences now. We didn't have that in the past, but it's obviously better.

Rogers: What changes have you seen in Sunflower County?

McDowell: Like I said, I'm still not personally satisfied with where we are there, because we don't have a countywide elected official. We still have whites in control of the basic economic structure. We don't have the representation, in my opinion, that we have in other counties, even though both of our, all three of our state legislators are now black. Huddleston [phonetic] just beat Walthrup [phonetic] for the seat that I had run for two or three times, and then Bill Richardson from Indianola is in the House of Representatives, and Willie Simmons, the senatorial district comes over into Sunflower County.
Brooks: From Bolivar.

McDowell: Right, from Bolivar. Those are big pluses. But we've got to get some blacks in the courthouse. That's what's killing us. We don't have a circuit clerk like they have in Washington here and Bolivar. We don't have a sheriff like they have in Coahoma or a number of other places. At one time, in Leflore County they had control of the Board of Supervisors and the tax assessor and some more things.

Brooks: Chancellory clerk.

McDowell: The chancellory clerk, yeah.

Brooks: We don't have one chancellory clerk in the Delta, I don't think.

McDowell: Right.

Brooks: I don't think we have.

McDowell: No, because it's one of those powerful positions.

Brooks: And lucrative.

McDowell: Right. And lucrative, right.

Brooks: Maybe more than the governor.
McDowell: And they have tight control of the politics.

Rogers: Chancellories do?

McDowell: Yeah. We've got two black supervisors, and I don't know to what extent that that's made a difference, but I'm assuming that obviously since they're there it's made a difference. But in terms of voting radical change, you've got to have a majority.

Rogers: What about relationships between the generations? How do you see the relationships between the younger people in the community and the middle-aged folk and older folk?

McDowell: At one point, it had gotten better. I think there's probably hostility developing now. I think a lot of young whites are resenting the progress that blacks have made, and they are also resenting the fact that they are not going to have the same stature that their parents had. I know this is true with a lot of these farm-level kids. Their daddy was Mr. Big and had unlimited resources and what have you. And now there appears to be a resurgence of racism among younger whites that we were getting along extremely well with at one time.

Rogers: Due to their perceived change in their own status or their lesser status?

McDowell: I guess we represent a threat to them economically and otherwise, politically and what have you. I don't think we want their women anymore. At one time, that was a big thing. They perceived every black man as wanting a white woman. I don't know that that's the case anymore. But that was part of the movement thing. They resented most--they would have let us vote if we hadn't had white women involved in the registration and in the Freedom Rides and what have you. But that was one of the things that they resented
most, but now it just appears to be the reality that they're facing a black that is their equal or their better in many instances.

This is the case with the legislature. The reason we've gotten reapportionment and the black judges and all of that is because people like Ed Black and all of those black legislators. We had the cream of the crop was in the legislature, and they just chewed these redneck farmer-types up. They were just so far above them that the whites are having to rethink the legislative position. Now you're having whites running now that are beginning to be more qualified, but at a point, they had just backed off and left the legislature to the common ignorant redneck types, and they went down and these black legislators chewed them alive. They would just run past them like they were standing still.

The guy, Walthrup, from Drew over there was a good example. He's totally ignorant and should never have been down there, and he didn't even know what was going on. That's why we don't have a circuit judge in Sunflower County is because when the reapportionment and all this was going on, he was somewhere being a good old boy and the other people out politicking. When Sunflower found out anything, they had two judges in Washington County and two in the LeFlore County. We were sitting there with Parchman [Prison] and one of the biggest caseloads in the Delta, and nobody. But like I say, it comes from having incompetent people in the legislature.

**Rogers:** You mentioned Parchman. Also, at the beginning of our talk you were talking about sentencing. Do you think blacks are still disproportionately disadvantaged by the criminal justice system?

**McDowell:** Oh, it's no doubt about it. A lot of it we have done to ourselves, and a lot of it we continue to do to ourselves. My pitch always to the jury now is to give them a chance to make a correction in the process. But we have blacks who sit on these juries, and they're simple-minded and they're easily led. We'll have, in my county, ten blacks and two whites, and we've had it in the last couple of times we've had eleven blacks and
one white go in and elect the white man the foreman. You know, can you believe in 1994 they still do this, but it happens.

**Rogers:** Out of this older sense of deference?

**McDowell:** I don't know how you explain it, because we have had religious people, we've had schoolteachers on juries, and you have a seventy-year-old white man who's an ex-used car dealer, and he comes out with the papers. He's the foreman. And you can get under the table then, because you've been had. And I don't know how you explain that, but like I said--

**Brooks:** It's how they see themselves.

**McDowell:** Yeah. We've had some breakthroughs. Some people are standing up and requiring the state to meet its burden of proof, but that's only been in the last few terms. Prior to then, we've had a horrible time trying cases before juries, which population-wise would be predominantly black anyway you take it.

**Rogers:** What have been your experiences as a black lawyer? Have you seen changes in the way that the black bar is treated?

**McDowell:** The black judges are making a big difference. That's leveling the playing field. To some extent, black district attorneys or assistants are playing a role. But there's a change. Simply the mechanics and the voters made a difference, the way that sheriff departments operate and all. Law enforcement can make or break a case, and all of that comes into play. So there is some progress, but at the same time, it's really not anything to brag about.
Rogers: How have things changed in Drew, from your advantage point as being a black attorney?

McDowell: We're in sad shape. In my opinion, we--I'm also the public defender for City Corps. Every Monday morning, as Fred Sanford said, there's enough of us in there to make a Tarzan movie. We've got a black police chief, too, in quotations, in Drew. That's in quotation marks. But we still have a long way to go in the criminal justice system.

The public stayed out of it as a whole, and you just had a handful of people participating. All of these great civil rights leaders that you hear about in Drew have not addressed the day-to-day problems that we are having. The two black people that we have on the board have not been effective in making a change. Some of it's their fault, and some of it's not.

Rogers: On the board of what?

McDowell: Aldermen. See, I was on the board for a couple of terms, and I got off primarily to try other ventures in politics. But I always kept the system's feet to the fire. The people who are there now are not as well versed as they ought to be and don't press as hard on issues. It was always a confrontation between me and the establishment, and if you won the vote, fine; if you didn't win the vote, you still make a record. But that's not the attitude they have now.

Of course, we had a lot of successes because we were able to compromise and whip them from a public relations standpoint. See, in Drew, my group had to file a lawsuit to get blacks on the city council. Ruleville and other places had always elected blacks, but nobody was good enough in Drew to be elected to the city council until after we filed the lawsuit, after which two of us went on. But that was only, what, in '81, '82, somewhere back in there.

Brooks: That's when the first black went on the Board of Aldermen?
McDowell: Uh-huh.

[Begin Tape 2, Side 1]

McDowell: It had nothing to do, really, with segregation, per se, but the farmers--Dubard [phonetic] is the chairman of the board. The farmers control the economy in that area, the tax assessments, the 6-C Section [phonetic] lands. All of these things are reasons why the whites have to control the school board. I mean, if they didn't, you know, it's a monster. The supplies, the things that are bought, the power, the awesome power of the school board. They've got the largest single budget in the area, and it's about economics, as well as the other stuff. So it's not just the limited issue of race, but it's an awesome--the school board has awesome power.

Rogers: Within the county economics.

McDowell: Right. And see, the thing that Ms. Carter is talking about is something that I tried to address years ago. Ms. Carter and others fought to keep the Drew separate school district in existence when her daughter was on the board.

I always took the position that we should have abolished the Drew school system and gone into the county, which would have given us majority control on the county and more power. But as long as the system stays like it is, the city board is going to appoint three people, and two are going to be elected at large from the county district. Those two elected people will always be white, and the city board will never appoint more than one black, until we get control of the board. So there will only be one black on the board forever the way the school system is set up now.
The obvious solution would have been to disband that separate district and put it into the county and give us more influence, because then we could control who the county superintendent was, the board members, and everything else.

**Brooks:** You would have needed a separate legislative action.

**McDowell:** Well, they had a procedure where that could be done. At the time, we had the requisite number of signatures and everything, but they told the black people that there wouldn't be any Drew Eagles, that we would have to take the name of Ruleville Central's team.

The Drew Eagles were never our team anyhow. We were the Hunter Tigers. The old black high school became the junior high school, and the stuff they got there now is the Archie Mannon [phonetic] mess. The Drew Eagles and all that mess, that's the Archie Mannon syndrome. We never came up through that system anyhow. But they had the blacks out talking about, "We ain't going to have no football team. We're going to have to merge with Ruleville." And we had a band director who said he wasn't going to have the band job, and they even had the cooks at the school, who were old ladies who should have been retired, out talking about they were going to lose their job as cooks.

But it was a horrible mistake that we made, because we didn't have the political astuteness to seize on the moment. And our school system is top heavy. We've got people in the superintendent and the higher echelon, several of them making $40,000 a year and above. All of that is just stuff that's being passed on to the taxpayers, and it's not helping us, because these are our worst enemies. Our worst enemies are in those positions right dead over us. So we should have had the political astuteness to disband that system, put it into the county, and then we'd be running the county now.

**Brooks:** Corrections is a big slice of the economy of Sunflower County.
McDowell: Except that we're not capitalizing on it. The people work there, but the money is going elsewhere. We don't have a conduit for keeping the money there. The people go north to Clarksdale or west to Cleveland or to Greenwood. The money is not turning over in the community. We don't have a decent clothing store or any outlet that would allow much of the money to stay there. So except for the Sunflower Grocery Store or something, we really don't have anything to brag about in terms of the economy. We don't have a hotel there. We don't have a decent restaurant that's capable of serving a mass number of people. We don't have a McDonald's or Shoney's or Wendy's or anything like that.

Brooks: You're talking about in Drew.

McDowell: In Drew, right. So Drew has not been able to capitalize on the Department of Corrections. You're familiar with what he's talking about?

Rogers: Yes.

McDowell: We've got the largest, we've got 17,000 acres right there in Sunflower County, but we haven't been able to really capitalize on that.

Rogers: Well, you would need things like a hotel or a motel, restaurant.

McDowell: It's just not there, and consequently, the people who make the money go back to where they came from.

Rogers: What are relationships like between younger black people and middle-aged folks like yourself and older people within the community?
McDowell: I don't know, it's hard to say. A large number of blacks now have just been taken over by trash. Younger people, you know, the hip-hop, bebop, rap stuff. The drug syndrome has wiped out a lot of people, and there's a gap in there now. We're just now beginning to retake some of those generations up under them, and we're catching hell, you know, where we're two or three generations in here. [Telephone interruption.]

McDowell: Sunflower, too.

Rogers: You wear a lot of hats.

McDowell: Yeah. That's because we had a majority of blacks on the board.

Rogers: You were saying about the generations.

McDowell: Okay. There's a gap in there, like from maybe sixteen to thirty, that we're really in trouble with, but we're beginning to regain something with those lower ages. There's a resurgence of dedication to betterment, improvement, and what have you. But we got wiped out in a couple of those generations. Then you've got the other problems we have, the religious community, and I can say that because I'm also pastor of a local church there. But we've got a lot of, in my opinion, bogus ministers who are just hustling the people for a living. Everybody who didn't have a job got a bible and started preaching, and they are putting on sideshows and raising money year round for anniversaries and what have you, and that's hurt us a lot, too.

Rogers: What church are you a pastor of?

McDowell: The Greater Holly Grove Baptist.
Rogers: What would you like to see happen?

McDowell: In terms of what?

Rogers: In terms of, I guess, the state of African-Americans in Mississippi, specifically in Sunflower.

McDowell: It's happening. We are on the move. It's just that I'm from the old school and I'm impatient a lot of times. But there is movement, upward I hope, and many of the things that we wished for are becoming realities. I personally probably won't benefit from some of them, like the seat that I ran for four times in the state legislature that Huddleston walked in because, you know, the times had changed. See, when I was running, we didn't get any support from elsewhere, but this guy got all kind of support, so he walked right into the seat.

So they are going to be a lot of situations where what we did won't necessarily benefit us personally, but it'll make it better and easier for somebody else to come in and do better. So I think there is progress. Even the judges who are winning these judges' races, a lot of them haven't gotten their feet wet, but the groundwork, hopefully, that we did in the past is making it easier for them.

Rogers: Are you happy?

McDowell: Oh, yeah. I really don't have any personal complaints, because I've been able to do many of the things that I wanted to do myself personally. So I'm happy, I guess you'd say. I'm not satisfied necessarily, but in terms of where I am and where I see the community going and all, I'm proud to have been involved and played some role, having played some role in it.
Rogers: What did the movement itself do for you?

McDowell: Well, I guess it--I got caught up in it, like I said, and I guess it inspired me to want to be president and all these things that I was told I couldn't be when I was a child.

Rogers: Owen, do you have any questions for Mr. McDowell?

Brooks: Did you ask him what he thought about race relations as compared to thirty years ago? Where have we come with that, Cleve, in the Delta or in Sunflower County?

McDowell: It's a sort of foggy situation. It's, to a large extent, better, but it's still not something that we can become satisfied with, because the tactics have just changed and we're involved in various economic projects where you can't get loans from banks, you can't get the financing to put in businesses like you need.

The situation's changed, and on a personal basis, people may tend to be more pleasant, but that's not really an indication that race relations are actually better, because blacks are still excluded from most places that we should be involved in. Just take the religious community. Eleven o'clock is still the most segregated hour anywhere. We don't come together in church.

The schools are still--Drew is fairly well integrated because of the demise of the private school, but it's still nothing to brag about. We still have segregation being perpetuated through these academies, and that's hurt us in the long run with race relations. It's better, but it's not something that we need to brag about. There's room for a lot of improvement.

Brooks: How about acquisition of power?
**McDowell:** We're still lacking in power. There's a perception by far too many blacks that you have to be white to have real power. I see that from my position as a lawyer involved with the court structure and all of that. There are a lot of people who still believe you've got to have a white lawyer to get an adequate defense. They don't believe that I can argue a case and stand my ground. They have this perception that basically I don't know as much as the white man, and then secondly that I'm not going to be strong enough to stand up and actually fight and demand the rights that a person is entitled to. That's a perception that a lot of times goes down the drain once I'm one on one with them, but there are too many blacks still believe basically in the white power structure.

**Rogers:** We've talked with Carver Randall, and he said that the middle class, when he got out of law school, that the middle-class black folk in Indianola still went to their white lawyers.

**McDowell:** Oh, yeah. That's still the case now.

**Rogers:** So too many black people, you think, still operate within that kind of old--

**McDowell:** Well, it's the plantation mentality, and this is the thing that our young people don't understand. A lot of our young people are not equal. Their opportunity to be equal and all of that may exist, but when you get a kid out there who drops out in the sixth grade or the eighth grade and what have you and runs around with nothing but that rap music and noise, and then coupled with drug involvement and what have you, you've got a weird thing there that is in no way equal when you put him up against what the white system is turning out, and that causes a lot of problems. That's some housekeeping stuff that we've got to deal with.

But we're developing a permanent underclass of people who are relying on things like welfare and drugs and so forth and criminal, just plain crime. We've got people who steal every day for a living. But that's not the real world. They're not going to make it that way, and we've got to do our homework, because that
large segment of the population is holding all of us back. It only takes one vote now to win an election, and if you've lost a substantial amount of your support and your power through drugs or ignorance or what have you, then we're in trouble.

**Brooks:** What about leadership overall in the black community as compared to thirty years ago?

**McDowell:** I think it's better. Well, it's better now. I say that we have better leadership, but we can't get the people to follow us.

**Rogers:** That's an interesting point.

**McDowell:** At one time, we had a bunch of Uncle Toms and what have you and people who really, in a lot of instances, were not equal. But now, like I was talking about the state legislature. You've got the cream of the crop down there. You've got competent people who call it like they see it. A lot of people don't like Bennie Thompson, but he's bold and daring in his assertions. And Willie Simmons in the state senate. But they have the credentials to actually provide leadership on a one-on-one basis, and if we can keep them attuned to our needs and make them accountable to us, then we will have effective leadership.

In the past, like I said, some of these colored preachers, situations in elections where the preachers are down there fighting over the white man's money, which supervisor is going to be elected and what sheriff is going to win and all of this, that was lousy leadership.

But we're getting away from a lot of that now, hopefully, even though we've still got a lot of old-line. Selfish leadership has been a thing of the past. People would do for themselves and would actually become independently wealthy off the movement and wouldn't be helping anybody except themselves. They would be up and in leadership roles, but they would only help themselves, by and large. That would be the bottom line to it.
I ain't going to call no names, but people like Charles Young over in Meridian, these people own TV stations and Holiday Inns and what have you, and they were able to amass this massive wealth, a comfortable situation for them and their family, but other people are still, there's just total poverty all around them, and you have to wonder about that. Of course, I know Charles. I grew up with him. I can use him as an example. But, you know, there are situations like that where it's just disproportionate.

Rogers: So there is good leadership coming up now, but more can be done?

McDowell: Yeah, more can be done. And like I said, we tend to become selfish. A lot of us have just decided that I'm going to get mine. Everybody else has gotten theirs. I'm going to get mine now. And that's hurting us to some extent. We've got selfish leadership in place, and we no longer care about the plight of the poor and the other people. We don't have the sympathy that we used to have and the concern for our neighbors and what have you.

Rogers: Anything else you'd like to add?

Brooks: No.

Rogers: Thank you very much.

McDowell: Okay.

[End of interview]
Index

Alexanders, ________ 19
Anderson, Reuben 23

Barnett, Ross 23
Bell, Derrick 28, 30
Black Panthers 42
Bond, Julian 17
Brown, R. Jess 29, 30

Carter, Ms. 50
Child Development Group of Mississippi (CDGM) 18
Civil War 3
Coahoma Opportunities 32
Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) 17
Corrections, Department of 51
Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) 9

Daimer, Vernon 27
Delta Ministry 34
Delta State College 36
Dorsey, L.C. 17

Eastland, Senator James 36
Equal Employment Opportunity Commission 42
Eubanks, Dr. 15
Evers, Medgar 9-11, 22

Freedom Summer 10

Gray, Duncan 29

Hall, Carsey 30
Hamer, Fannie Lou 18
Hatch Act 39
Head Start 18, 35, 37-39
Head Start Training Coordinating Council (TCC) 32
Howard University 28
Huddleston, ____ 44, 53

Jackson State College 7, 9, 13-16

King, Leslie 29
King, Martin Luther Jr. 9
Lafayette, ______ 17
Legal Services 39-42
Lewis, Jon 17

Mannon, Archie 50
March on Washington 24
Marshall, Thurgood 28, 30
Mary Holmes College 33
McAllister, Jane Ellen 16
McCoy, Dr. 15
McDaniels, _____ 43
McDowell, Ferge 3
McDowell, Sally 3
McLaurin, Charles 18
Meredith, James 10, 19-21, 24, 25
Miller, William 23
Mississippi Valley State 38
Motley, Constance 28, 30

National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) 9, 10, 27, 28
Nixon, Richard 39

Parchman Prison 47
Poverty Program 18, 33, 35, 37, 39
Public accommodations 33

Race relations 5, 54, 55
Randall, Carver 43, 56
Reddicks, Jacob 8
Richardson, Bill 44
Rogers, Dr. 15
Ross, Dewey 5

Sage Plantation 2
School integration 7, 12, 19, 21, 42
Sharecropping 2
Simmons, Willie 57
Slavery 3
Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) 9
Stennis, Senator John 36
Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) 17

Texas Southern University 19, 28, 29
Thompson, Bennie 57
Till, Emmett 5-7
Tougaloo College 8, 14, 33
Tuskegee Institute 14
Walker, Margaret  15
Wallace, George  23
Walthrup, _______ 44, 46
Williams, Jewel  38
Williams, John Bell  34

Young, Charles  57
Young, Jack  31
Young, Jack Sr.  30