



Oral history with Mayor Bennie G. Thompson

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Biography

Bennie G. Thompson was born in Bolton, Mississippi, on January 28, 1948. He received a B.A. in political science from Tougaloo College, Tougaloo, Mississippi, in 1968, and an M.S. in educational administration from Jackson State University, Jackson, Mississippi, in 1972.

Mr. Thompson taught in public schools from 1968-1970 and was elected mayor of Bolton, Mississippi, in 1973. He served as project director of the Tri-County Community Center, Bolton, Mississippi; Chairman of the Board, Farish St. YMCA; Vice-Chairman of the Board of the Delta Ministry; and Assistant Director of the Teacher Corps. He is a member of the Mt. Beulah Development Foundation, American Civil Liberties Union and the Southern Regional Council. In 1979 he was elected to the Hinds County Board of Supervisors.

He has been honored among Outstanding Young Men of Mississippi by the NAACP, named among Outstanding Personalities of the South in 1971, recognized as Politician of the Year by Jackson State University in 1973, and received the Alumnus of the Year Award from Utica Junior College in 1974.

He is married to the former London Johnson.

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Transcript

This is an interview of the Mississippi Oral History Program of The University of Southern Mississippi. The interview is with Mayor Bennie G. Thompson of Bolton, Mississippi and is being conducted at Mayor Thompson's office in Bolton on February 13, 1974. The interviewer is Chester Morgan.

Dr. Morgan: The first thing that I want to do is thank you for taking the time to do this and letting me come here in your office. I would like to start off with a little bit about your background. Has your family lived in Mississippi?

Mr. Thompson: Yes.

Dr. Morgan: For several generations or how far back?

Mr. Thompson: As far back as I can trace, in terms of birth certificates and what have you, my family has basically stayed in either Madison or Hinds County. That's going back three generations.

Dr. Morgan: You were born in -

Mr. Thompson: In Bolton.

Dr. Morgan: Bolton. Just for the tape, when were you born?

Mr. Thompson: January 28, 1948.

Dr. Morgan: 1948. If you could, I would just like to briefly cast back when you were young and what it was like growing up in a small town like this. What do you remember about those days?

Mr. Thompson: Well, childhood days are always cherished, even though you had some ups and downs. What I remember most about my childhood in Bolton centered around basically my friends and associates. There were about ten of us in Bolton who were the same age, attended the same school, same church, and basically participated in athletics and what have you together. Out of that relationship in our younger days, we were able to do what you have here, basically put together the machine necessary to elect me mayor of Bolton. You know, far from that, I remember Bolton being a separate community. White community and black community. The whites in Bolton had their own activity. The Kiwanis Club and different other fraternal and social organizations that the whites had. We had two



schools, you know. A white school and a black school. Like I was saying, I guess ever since Bolton has been here, it has been a black and white community.

Whites sort of got along with blacks who stayed in their place. Staying in the place meant that you didn't try to do anything in town business, and you always said yes sir to the whites who were either older or richer. It was basically white was number one and black was number two. I had several run-ins when I was in elementary school about whites trying to get me to tell them yes sir and yes ma'am. And other people had problems; mine was not isolated by no means. I would imagine that until the last four years, Bolton basically remained a dual community. And why I say the last four years, is that we have had integration of schools, although the school here in Bolton is still all black. The whites attend White Citizens Council school. The election of three black aldermen in 1969 somewhat broke the ice in Bolton. In many respects, for the first time, whites recognized that the blacks in Bolton were something other than second class citizens. I can go back to when my father was a mechanic for several whites in Bolton, you know, he was always Will; that was his name. He did what they said. They wanted him to do something, he did it and didn't question it. I still have whites who come up and say, "Yes, your daddy and I were good friends." But I understand what that friendship was. It wasn't a one to one kind of friendship; it was more or less a white-black friendship to the point of saying that I'm a white man and you're a black man. Although we are friends, I'm still better than you are and you must recognize that I am better than you are. That's the kind of relationship it was.

Dr. Morgan: I don't want to interrupt you but there's a lot of things that I want to ask. I will try to keep them in some kind of order. That was probably, I suppose, typical Mississippi, but do you think it was more pronounced in a town this small than it would have been, say, in a larger town?

Mr. Thompson: I think that the racism exists everywhere in this country. Not only in just small towns, but in big cities. It is, more or less, you know, the person who is doing it here, whereas I might go to Jackson -

Dr. Morgan: Yes, that is what I was getting at. More of the idea that you probably know everybody here and -

Mr. Thompson: Right. I know every white and black person in town so, therefore, I can readily identify a person as quote "Good person" or a racist. That is just because I know everybody, whereas if I was in a city of maybe ten or fifteen thousand, when you would call the certain person's name, I wouldn't have feelings one way or the other because I didn't know them. In many respects, racism is not as pronounced, simply because until recently it was not a problem. Everybody stayed in their place. So many people didn't look on it as racism; they looked on it as a way of life. Myself, I look on it as a racist way of life, because defining a system saying that I cannot elevate myself to this particular point because I am black indicates to me that that system is racist.

Dr. Morgan: Did the feelings on your part and, say, this generation, is that a break maybe with the past, the blacks feelings in the past? Or at least their actions?

Mr. Thompson: Yes, see, because the first black was registered to vote in Bolton in 1967. Until then, all of the elections, all of the functions of the political process was conducted by only the whites in Bolton. Blacks never participated in any meaningful decision making ever in the city of Bolton.

Dr. Morgan: Can you put your finger on any circumstances or anything in particular, at least in your own mind, that caused the action to come when it did?



Mr. Thompson: I think that history here helped us. When I talk about history, I'm talking about past acts of brutality and other things against blacks perpetrated by whites. We have had several killings in Bolton over a thirty or forty year history and there are still people in town who remember that. They remember their old Bolton where if a white policeman stopped me, I had to say "Yes, sir," and "No, sir" and go through that whole show, I called it, of showing respect for the person. That helped us because in our running for office, we indicated to people that in 1930 a black man was drug through the streets of Bolton behind a cop. In 1942 a black man was killed in this jail. We want to insure that this doesn't happen again. The only way that we can insure that is to gain control of the mechanism that allowed that to happen. You know, a mechanism is the town government. I don't think, I might be wrong, that that will happen again because people know that we stand for right. Right has no color. It's either you are a law abiding citizen or you are a criminal. There ain't no color no where. That is what we stand for. Now, the other thing that, I think, meant a lot, apart from the historical aspect of Bolton's past, had to do with a new crop of young persons coming out of college.

Dr. Morgan: That's - college, do you think that -

Mr. Thompson: Yes, I think that for me, I went to Tougaloo College. A small, black, private college, just outside of Jackson. In my learning there - okay, back up a step. When I left high school, my only goal in life was to get a college degree and leave Mississippi. But the years I spent at Tougaloo completely turned that around and said that, "You ought to stay where you are and try to do something for that area." For several reasons, you're familiar with what you are dealing with. You have identified what the problems are. The only thing that you have to do is work out the solutions.

Now, I remember coming home several times from college and being stopped in Bolton by the night watchman. He would go through all of those questions about who my folks were and what I was doing in town and at that time, I had a natural and a beard. If you can imagine 1966-1967 and wearing a beard, you were either a socialist, a communist or something like that. So I had all of that to deal with, and that helped me a lot in terms of finding out just how sick Bolton really was. I said, "Hey, when I finish school, I'm coming back." I majored in political science in college and I was able to see just how the system worked in terms of progress, so to speak. If you have got stagnant town government, you have a stagnant town. The people become stagnant and pretty soon, instead of your population increasing, it starts decreasing, which was just Bolton's case. I think we lost something like ten folks between 1960 and '70. But there was no reason for that.

When the next town to us, the population doubled - well, it really increased ten fold - which is Clinton. If you can remember Clinton ten years ago, it was the same size as Bolton, but if you look at it now, it is ten times as large. The population, per capital income, and a lot of ingredients that go into making a good community. Taking that into consideration, I said, " Hey, I want to do something." The other thing is that the former mayor said that Bolton was all right until I got out of school. He said that folks were enjoying it. Like I say, given what was there and what your place was, a person who didn't have much on the ball probably would enjoy it, but I had a different idea as to what Bolton ought to be. I saw Bolton as a place for everybody, regardless of race and what have you. Believe it or not there is a serious age prejudice in Bolton that existed not only for young white but young black too. Even in the church here. You didn't do certain things because you were an adolescent or a teenager. That was like being secretary of the Sunday School. There was always an elderly black or white lady that did that. There wasn't no breaks from tradition or anything, and when you came to church, you had your certain section of the church to sit in, and so not only was it racism on the part of the white and black, but old black against young black and old white against young white.



Dr. Morgan: How intense - I don't want to stop you again, but how intense was that break between older blacks and, say, your generation? What were some of the specific ways that it came out; can you remember any specific incidences?

Mr. Thompson: Okay, I can give some illustrations that I think might help.

Dr. Morgan: Please do.

Mr. Thompson: In junior high school, take for instance, I didn't want to sing in the choir. I don't have a good voice. The principal told me that I either sing in the choir or I wouldn't pass my grade. That is one instance. I wanted to, during the early sixties, to participate in the sit-in's and the demonstrations in Jackson, at Woolworths and what have you. A lot of people said, "Boy, you don't know what you are doing. You are going to get yourself killed up there fooling with that mess." But I had in my own mind that that is the direction that we need to be headed. And like I said, you get off into the church aspect of it; young people either served as ushers or collection plate folks. They never read the scripture; they never opened services or nothing. They didn't deal in any decision making.

I think that, flip it over to the white side, that's probably the reason that we don't have as many white young people in Bolton as we do black today. I think that they saw what they were getting, basically - well, it might not have been bad, but at least they said if I leave Bolton and get away from that old influence, I might be able to think for my own self. Whereas blacks [who] never had the opportunity to do anything, said, "Hey, I am going to stay right here and try to make this work." Even if you were young and white, you did have certain opportunities that young black kids just didn't have. We couldn't play baseball at night because we didn't have a lighted field, but the school up there had a lighted field, but it was a white school. We couldn't play. We could sit and watch, though, from the road, but we just couldn't do it. To give you another example, there is a swimming pool up here right now; it used to be white, but I can't wait to put my swimming trunks on when the summer come, to break that up. Because it's no use in anybody kidding themselves. The South ain't going to rise again. If it rises again, it will rise over Bolton, as long as I am here, because we won't operate from the standpoint that any man is inferior. You know, he is a man, regardless of his color. He'll always be treated that way.

Dr. Morgan: What do you think caused - let's say, obviously, there was even opposition on the part of older blacks to your participation and your attempt to cross that color line, to take that step. Of course, it is speculation, but what do you think caused that inactivity and indecision of going and stepping out?

Mr. Thompson: You know, it's fear. We had cross burnings in '65 and '66 that - they were burned at strategic locations, where blacks who either were sympathetic to the civil rights movement or participated, a cross was burned there. So readily the next day, people identified those folks as bad, so to speak. In identifying them as bad, that instituted a lot of fear in other folks. You know we had the Headstart center burned down. They say it was a gas explosion, but now, it's mighty funny that people living all around it saw it burn and they heard nothing explode. They are living right beside it. So that, in turn, put a little fear in folks. Then the other part of it is that folks had been killed here. We had a man that got killed on the railroad tracks. The facts about it, the young lady that is the deputy clerk now, her father got killed on the railroad tracks. There was a lot of speculation there that a white man did it. So, you see, we had that running through. Now, we played the opposite tune of that. You know, people said, "Oh no, you can't get involved in that mess. You are going to come up like Eddie Jones did," which happened to be the black guy's name that got killed on the tracks. Well, we say, "Yes, but look, if we happen to achieve this goal, you won't have to worry about so and so getting killed on the tracks", so you see what I am saying. It is basically reversing that fear that many blacks, especially older blacks that remembered what went on, and turned it into saying, "Hey I want a different life." There we came from another standpoint. We even



said to a lot of parents, "Do you want your child to grow up in the same kind of environment that you grew up with? Do you want him to go through all of the hardships, trials and tribulations that you went through just because you were black? Or do you want to give them an opportunity to get an education and do better?"

Dr. Morgan: Did you encounter any pretty stiff opposition? Obviously, you did from whites, but did you encounter fairly stiff opposition from the blacks?

Mr. Thompson: Yes, you have still got people saying that the time ain't right and we ought to work this thing out together. What is the use of putting an all black slate in, why don't you all sit down and try to work things out. But we went back to them and showed them that the election in '69, we tried just that. We could have taken over Bolton in 1969, but we said, "No, this is a white and black community and we ought to be able to sit down man to man at a government table and work out things." See what I am saying? So we just ran three instead of five aldermen. Now, what turned out that at the first meeting the clerk told me, said - well, he told the three black aldermen, "I'm going to tell you right now, I'm not going to do a thing any of you niggers say." So that set the tone for the whole four years from '69 to '73. I mean, we didn't do nothing but come down here and I call him a redneck son of a bitch and he would call me a black son of a bitch and this kind of a thing, but we didn't get nothing done. Bolton was dying, so we said, "Hey, if we want to do something for Bolton, either we find some right thinking white folks to run with us, or we will run our own slate." We couldn't find no right thinking white folks. I mind you, we have got some, but they are scared. Just like they burn my house down, they will burn his down, if they find out that he is sympathetic. That is why the former chief of police quit. He said, "I don't have anything against you all, but if" - he said something like, "It will change up when we get to the white boy's - ." That they had already started that not speaking to his wife and a lot of other kind of soul kind of stuff to let them know that we don't want you to associate [with] them folk down there now, since they got it. So in that process whites who would not necessarily come to our side, but who would work with us for the common good are reluctant to, simply because they have that fear of being ostracized from the white community.

Dr. Morgan: Now, were there any kind of organized white position, or was it just kind of -

Mr. Thompson: Oh, yes, there were fourteen whites running for office and fourteen blacks. It was a clear-cut racial question.

Dr. Morgan: What I mean, in this area of intimidation was there a, for instance, the first thing that comes to mind is some kind of Klan activity. Was there any kind of organized opposition to -

Mr. Thompson: To us? Yes, I mean, there were moves made to discredit us and this kind of thing. Whites spread the rumor of, "How could I be mayor of a town, and I didn't even stay in my own house." Well, you know, I rent a house. They were trying to say that if you want to be mayor, you're supposed to have a lot of money and live in big white house on the hill. So I countered that by saying, "Most of us here don't own our own house." That's what I did, I reversed the psychology there and used it in my favor, because, let's face it, it is our houses in Bolton that are raggedy. It is black folks in Bolton that don't own property, you know. It is black people that leave Bolton at five in the morning to go on to a job in Jackson or Vicksburg. White people got it made here, and that is what I was trying to show them. Why can't I, as a black person, work in Bolton? Or why can't I own a house in Bolton, or why can't I do a number of things that whites have traditionally done all of their lives. That is what we basically express our goals on.

The young man now, we just got him out of - one of our policeman, just got out of the training academy. He had no dreams whatsoever when he was coming up of ever being a policeman in Bolton, let alone



one that had training and this kind of thing. So now he coaches the Little League football team here, and people see him as somebody other than just a policeman. They see him as a friend. You know, we could have had that all along, but in the process of police departments of ten years ago, it was to keep you in your place rather than meet the needs of the community. We have a delinquency problem; why can't we get all them bad kids together on a football team and work with them from there? Take them home in the police car and show them how the radio works, let them blow the siren. Their tax money is paying for the operation of the car and the salary of the person. So why can't they relate to the policeman as a friend rather than an oppressor? So those were the kind of things that I was talking about. It is just too bad that we have not been able to break the ice up to this point on many other whites.

We have had some come in like you and I talking now, and say, "I'm with you. But I've got my friends to go back to and if they knew that I was down here telling you this, they wouldn't speak to me again." We have had several that have come in and done that. But, now, as a whole, I don't get that much participation out of whites. I kind of figured that. It's a new thing. Many of them saw Bolton going to the dogs after we took over. Because their conception of a black man was that he couldn't administrate a town, and it doesn't require anything. So part of their fear lied in what their concepts of a black man was. You know, he was lazy until you just made him work and this kind of thing. But so far as being able to write a letter or being able to do other kinds of things, they couldn't see him in that capacity. Like, three of us who ran had master degrees. Two of the other ones had college degrees, so there was some form of training. We didn't just run because we were black. Hell, we ran because we thought we could do the best job for this town as a whole. It was just too bad that we couldn't get whites to think along that same vein when we were trying to select candidates.

Dr. Morgan: I really get into this period since sixty-nine, but I would like to go back and ask you a couple of other things. This might be a tough question: Casting back, how old were you, or when do you first remember becoming aware that there was a difference? What impressions do you remember about becoming aware to the fact that there was black and white and there was a difference?

Mr. Thompson: Age wise?

Dr. Morgan: Yes, or circumstances, either.

Mr. Thompson: I guess I always knew that I was a little colored boy, okay. It was something that nobody had to tell me. It was just that I saw who stayed on my street, and I saw who I went to school with, and I saw who I went to church with and who I played with, and all of them were black. Okay. So I readily identified my place as being at the black church, at the black school, on the black street, in the black sports. Now, in terms of somebody coming up and saying to me, "You're black, you stay in your place", I never had that. I just had instances that indicated to me that I was black. Okay, to give you an example, I guess ever since there has been Bolton Water Works here in Bolton, you paid your water bills here at city hall. So I, one Saturday, my mother sent me to town to pay the water bill. The guy actually said, "That's all you want to pay?" And I said, "Yes." And he said, "What did you say?" This was the policeman at the time, and I said, "Yes, that's all I want to pay." And he said, "Nigger, don't you know how to talk to a white man?" It just dawned on me at that time that he wanted me to say "Yes, sir" to him. Other than that, I answered his question. From that day on, that kind of stuff [was] in my thoughts, sort of speak, and I guess I should have been about thirteen, fourteen years old at that time when that incident occurred. I always read about different things that happened to other people that kind of led me to believe that it was, indeed, a dual society. I said, "Hey, I don't like that."

Dr. Morgan: This might be a real tricky question; I'm not sure how to phrase it. Let's say before you became educated enough or old enough to really sense a bit of indignation or anger, or sense of injustice,



did you ever - I'm still having trouble phrasing this - did you ever maybe begin to think, maybe I'm not. Did that psychology ever threaten to seep in. Was that ever a problem? With maybe on some of the reluctance of the part of the other blacks?

Mr. Thompson: Well, you're saying that, "Because I'm black, I'm inferior." Is that what you are saying?

Dr. Morgan: Before you became old.

Mr. Thompson: Yes, I'll give you an example in school again. The school buses that we rode were always the hand-me-down school buses that came from the white schools. So, like, if this bus was number fifteen, that white kids rode, well, about three years later you would be riding that same bus. When it was new it was good for the white kids, but when it started getting raggedy they put it over here to us, okay. Just like a school book, the school, the junior high that I went to in Bolton was called Ruben Junior High. The white school was called Bolton Consolidated School. I would open a textbook and it says, "This book is the property of Hinds County Public Schools," then it would have "School Name: Bolton Consolidated School" which led me to believe that they had used these books three or four years until they got worn out and then passed them down to us. So if you follow what I am saying, said, not on face cover that you are inferior, but it is kind of an inherent thing that you will interpret. If everything I get is the hand-me-down from the white folks, I am soon going to believe that everything that I deal with is secondary. So therefore, I'll soon believe that as a person, I am secondary or inferior.

Dr. Morgan: This is getting into the emotion and feelings and things, but I think that is valid, perhaps why in the past more blacks were more reluctant to step out and in fact they might have become -

Mr. Thompson: Yes, but the other things that public school teachers didn't - well, they still don't have the academic freedom that I think should be required to teach in public schools. I can remember the two years that I taught public schools. The first day, the black principal, now, told me, you don't talk race, you don't talk religion, and you don't talk sex in this school. Hey, you know, I think that a person ought to know every walk of life or every facet of the life. As a public school teacher, [if] I can't at least put on the table for my class everything that is out there, I don't need to be here. I guess that is one reason that I eventually got fired from teaching public schools, because my concept of education is not the limited form that the kids nowadays get. It is basically an exposure to everything. I am not saying that in the process of teaching about white and black I am going to say that, "The blacks are better than the whites, because I am black." I am going to lay it out on the line; history speaks for itself. Now, in terms of making up the minds of the children, now, that is up to them. I want to put the facts before them.

I remember another instance in Mississippi history - the Mississippi history books that James K. Bettersworth put out. All through that Mississippi history book it either showed black people as slaves, butlers or choppers in the field. You didn't see a black senator or a black representative or a black lieutenant governor. You only saw black people in menial kinds of responsibilities. So I supplemented that history with what I called, "concrete history" in the terms of the black folks. We have had those kinds of people who were black and white, so we don't need to exclude any of them. So I told them, I am not going by what the book says all of the time. I think that the book has eliminated a lot of important black history. You can imagine a kid opening that book and on every other page there is a butler or maid that is black and there is a big, white, rich plantation owner standing by his white columns or riding his white horses or riding in the carriage. That does something to the image of the kid, you know. I was a big pusher of self-concept when I was in school. If a kid really doesn't think enough of himself to want to be something, he is lost. There is no use in even teaching him, if he doesn't think that he is as good as the next man.



Dr. Morgan: Yes, that's probably what I was getting at before, about that psychology inferiority ever seep in.

Mr. Thompson: Yes, but you know, you don't have to preach it for it to arrive. You see, if everything you see is inferior, if your books, even your chairs would have - you know how we all wrote on the desk tops in elementary school. Well, if your desk top had Bolton Consolidated School carved in it, that showed that you had a hand-me-down chair. You know, just like you did all of the other things. So basically, in your mind, if that is all you have related to for your first ten or fifteen years, you are going to say, "Hey, I'm inferior." Nobody has to say a word.

Dr. Morgan: When did you personally begin to break out of that? What things influenced you to begin to question that and begin to act on it?

Mr. Thompson: Basically it was my college, you know. Tougaloo College has a history of being very liberal when it comes to academics. Until I went to college, I had never read a book from cover to cover. I had never read a book of any substance written by a black man. Just like this week is Negro History Week; well, that was the only time that we ever talked about black folks. The rest of the time we went with what was in the book, you know. After going there and concentrating in political science, having the opportunity to hear a number of great white and black speakers while I was there, influenced me an awful lot. During the summer months, I would always go off and work to go back to school. I worked two summers in Chicago and I think that, coupled with my work experience and my college, academic studies, that kind of put it all together so to speak. It taught me that I wasn't inferior because I was black, and I saw my test scores compared to other white and black kids in Mississippi, and it wasn't the highest, but it wasn't the lowest either. So you know, I looked at that and I looked at some of the other things that I was off into, there at - you had to have something going to be there. Student government and other kind of stuff. I feel that I had a time for the stuff, you know; I remember the Meredith march. I was on that march. You couldn't do that if you were at Jackson State, because that was against the system. I am not saying that Jackson State is by no means inferior, because I got my masters there. I have a lot of confidence in the instructors there and in the program that they are trying to get over. But you know the other things - while there, I met Martin Luther King, Robert Kennedy, and some other folks, who I would like to think helped me pattern my life and what I want to be. I don't want to be a Martin Luther King or a Robert Kennedy.

Dr. Morgan: Well, would you say that higher education for you is the key to, if you can nail it on down, that would be the most important factor?

Mr. Thompson: Yes, it is. Public education in Mississippi is too stagnant. I'd argue that with anybody, you know.

Dr. Morgan: Talk about that if you would, about your high school. What kind of quality was it and what kind of psychology was there involved in that?

Mr. Thompson: Being a smart student, all right, I got - and I am saying smart because I had a so-called B average - I got the better courses offered at the high school I attended that were college preparatory courses. I had Algebra I [and] II, Geometry, Trigonometry Elementary functions, physics, all of the stuff that the smart kids took. But I really didn't get off into me as a person, which probably would have benefited me more than any of those courses, because if I could have understood me, I probably could have done better in those courses. But I saw high school as just the next step to college. I didn't see high



school as building a foundation that would follow me the rest of my life. Or as an area where I could prepare myself to better whatever I am going to do. I just saw it as that step to college.

Part of it was because I, my high school didn't have a counselor. We just went to school, and if we had a problem, it was your tough luck. The white high schools had counselors. They had people who said, "Hey, why don't you go to so and so school, because you're very apt in this area." I had nobody. I sent my own applications off. I applied for my own financial aid; I selected my own college, and I guess it was a stroke of luck that I selected Tougaloo, but if you could follow what I am saying. You have a lot of kids who finish high school whose mind ain't together worth nothing, as to what they want to do. If they are given the proper guidance in high school, that might help them put it together.

Dr. Morgan: Obviously, that was lacking. Now, as a teacher who has taught and who has a master's degree and looking back, just the class work aspect of education at [a] separated school system, was that adequate?

Mr. Thompson: Yes, you've got the trained basic concepts, I'll say, in the black school as I believe you would get in the white school. Two and two is four; I don't care where you learn it. But I think that there is a lot of exposure that white kids got that black kids didn't. Both curricular and extra-curricular. We didn't have a science lab at my high school; the white kids did. I didn't know what - okay, I knew what a test tube was and I knew what a microscope was because I read, but I never had the opportunity to use one. You go into a white school and they have got all that just laying up there; it was that kind of stuff you know. We had athletics, but ours was confined to just that area where the principal could scrape enough money to send the bus to the game. We didn't go to the district AA conference championship because we were a black school. If we went, we went as a black school to the black district, that was played at the local high school. We didn't go to the coliseum and those other kinds of places to participate. We didn't have the opportunities to take those trips that many of the white kids did, because we just were told, "That ain't what you all are supposed to do."

Dr. Morgan: In going to Tougaloo, I get the impression that that offered at least an attitude or something there that would have been lacking even at another black school. Could you put your finger on that and describe it?

Mr. Thompson: There are several reasons that I give for Tougaloo helping shape my life. I think that the largest class that I had at Tougaloo was 13 in that class, which basically meant the student/faculty relationship was almost one to one. I mean, if you go to a class with thirteen or fourteen in it and we didn't have lectures, all of ours was strictly read this, prepare yourself to talk on this discussion. And you were called on maybe five times during that class period, so you had to be ready. In the process of doing all of that preparation, the instructor was saying to you, "Hey, you can do this just as well as anybody else can, it's just applying yourself." And being black, you are going to have to be better, because let's face it, we still live in a racist society. You can be white and get a job much easier than I can right now. You and I both have somewhat reasonable facsimiles of beards, right. If both of us walked into a place applying for the job, the only reason that I would get that job, is that I was almost super qualified, over qualified than you. If we went in there man to man, same basic education, the odds are much more for you for getting that job than me. That is the way the system is set up and that is what my teachers told me. Hey, you want to do something you are going to have to be better.

Editor's Note: At this point there was a brief interruption. The interview continues on Tape one, Side two.



Dr. Morgan: Okay, we were talking about your college and you were talking about the kind of education that you got at Tougaloo. You obviously went to Jackson State. Can you compare what would have been the difference in the education that you were talking about and what you would get at another black college?

Mr. Thompson: I guess, first of all, you would have to look at curriculum. The curriculum that I had at Tougaloo, you had standard courses. Okay, you had to have so many hours in math, so many hours in science and this kind of thing, but I think when it got into the elective area of the curriculum there was a lot of diversity. I mean, like, you could take Mississippi and the South. A course in that. It was not the traditional Mississippi history. I believe we read about twelve books in that course, I'm not sure, but I know we did a lot of reading. It wasn't the so-called "Yankee history of Mississippi." We read Kenneth Stamp, C. Vann Woodward, all kinds of authors. We discussed the books and we discussed what we thought the author was trying to say, whether we were pro or con. Some points we'd be the devil's advocate; on other points we would be on the other side. But I think in that diversity in the curriculum, that probably helped more than anything else at the college, because I remember going down to the capital, but I didn't go as a "Colored spectator". I went very critical, because I had been taught in my state and local government course, what state government was all about and what the folks down there are really trying to do, black folks especially. From repealing the compulsory school act and all of that other kinds of stuff, lot of those laws were geared just towards black folks.

In terms of that curriculum, you know, we had Stokley Carmichael who spoke to our class. We had a number of controversial people and people who, I think, would stimulate anybody to think. You didn't say, "Hey, this joker is crazy, does he know what he is talking about." And in the process of taking either side, you know, you had to defend that side. In order to defend that side, you had to do research. But, see, at those state institutions at that time, they had the speaker ban. At that time Charles Evers and what I call moderate folks couldn't even come to the campuses to speak, without getting approval from the board of trustees. So that, in effect, limited the amount of exposure that students at Jackson State would get.

Dr. Morgan: I don't want to put words in your mouth, but would there be a degree of tacit acceptance of the way things were at a place like, let's say, Jackson, State or a state institution?

Mr. Thompson: I think that many of the people that taught in those studies talked with the hope in mind that one day it would be different. I want to be here when that change comes, because whenever it gets here where we have the academic freedom to really get down to the business of teaching and not what I call brainwashing, it is going to be good. I've seen that evolve from my college days at Tougaloo to my graduate days at Jackson State. It's a difference. There is a difference in the student body at Jackson State now, and there is a difference in the faculty. It is a difference both in the terms of academic preparations for the faculty and where the students on campus see themselves as going. I mean, you might of - you know, W.E.B. DuBois talked about the elite ten concept. That some colleges only wanted the real smart folks to come there. Other colleges would just take anybody. Now, that somewhat was what was happening with Jackson State. They were not the elite ten. They had no concept of - I won't say that - I'll say that they knew what was going on, but it was because of the system that they were in, that they could not penetrate. Do you see what I am saying?

Dr. Morgan: Yes.

Mr. Thompson: I mean, academic preparations in terms of faculty members is probably the same at Tougaloo and Jackson. But it was the amount of lead way that the faculty had at Tougaloo to really get off into the teaching and learning process with the student. What made it a little better, simply because of the speaker bans. All of the courses that are taught at Jackson State have to be approved. They have to go



through a lot of scrutiny, you know, people say, "Hey, why are you going to teach this?" Or "You don't teach this because it might make so and so in the legislature mad and we won't get our appropriations for next year." Then it gets into another arena.

The institutions of higher learning in Mississippi are nothing but political pawns. Those folks that sit on the Board of Trustees of the Institutions of Higher Learning, are not a bit more educators than you and I are to the - if you understand what I am saying? Their basic concern is to prolong a system that is dying, for as long as it possibly can. They ain't about the business of teaching kids, they are about the business of - I was looking at that guy on television Monday, you know, he was talking about that process of desegregating the institutions of higher learning; we are going to put qualified blacks in white institutions and whites in black institutions.

But that is a racist statement, when he said that we are going to put a qualified black in a white institution. But he turns around and says we are going to put a white in a black institution. That is the kind of institutional racism that is existing in the institutions of higher learning now.

It goes on beyond that board level. It's entrenched in those institutions. I think that an academic setting ought to be free especially in higher education. That's where we are going to send people out in the world when we are finished with them to be men, women, mothers, fathers, and all kinds of people. If we don't provide those kinds of things that they will need once they get out, we can close it down. We are fooling ourselves. And that is what is happening. My wife is at Southern right now, getting fairly good grades. But she really sees what is going down there as being very "don't rock the boat", if you understand what I mean. And that is not education. Education has a lot of different things. Education is getting to that person, what he needs to know, both academically and once he gets out. And they're fooling ourselves.

Dr. Morgan: Let me touch on another area, and that's how active were you in specific instances in the civil rights movements, say, in the '60s or anytime? On an active level, where you actually participated. Or were acquainted with people and events.

Mr. Thompson: I actually got locked up once.

Dr. Morgan: If you could, go back to the first time that you got involved and how it all happened from a personal standpoint.

Mr. Thompson: I remember my summers in junior high school, I didn't work at that time, basically because black kids just didn't have nothing to do. All of the jobs were gobbled up by the white kids, both college and high school. So I would always go to Jackson with my aunts; I had two aunts in Jackson at the time. During one of those summers, I had the opportunity to meet Medgar Evers. The meetings at that time were called mass meetings. They were held in churches and what have you throughout Jackson. Basically, when that sit-in movement started rising and I heard the man speak, I said, "Wow" right then. He was talking stuff that many people felt, but didn't have the nerve enough to talk. It was basically about why are black folks the ones that don't have good jobs, why are black folks the ones that don't have decent housing? You know, basic problems, raising the issue. Out of that, you know, a couple other friends in town, my cousin, we said, "We're going on with it." So we went down and we marched and we got locked up. They let us out because we were under age, but I saw this stale bologna. I saw the cold bricks, I saw the stale bread.

Dr. Morgan: This is in the jail?



Mr. Thompson: This was in the fairgrounds in Jackson.

Dr. Morgan: Now, when about would this be? What specific -

Mr. Thompson: That was early sixties.

Dr. Morgan: What were these specific activities?

Mr. Thompson: They were strictly nonviolent to the point that, you know, they would instruct you on how to protect yourself so you won't get hurt. Ball up in a knot. This kind of thing. Basically, saying, "Hey, my money will spend," money is money, there ain't no white money and no black money. Why can't I go to Woolworth's and buy a sandwich if I want one and why can't I sit anywhere on that counter, if we have got the same money? Why can't I go to Primo's and eat, you know, if I were to take my family out to a Sunday dinner?

Dr. Morgan: If you can, can you remember specific instances of things that happened to you or things that you saw?

Mr. Thompson: I have seen a number of acts of racism in my lifetime. I actually got expelled from Tougaloo on one of them. In 1967, when they had the first so called Jackson State riot, there was a black guy that got killed, right off of the campus, named Ben Brown. Well, I was over there demonstrating that day and Mayor Allen Thompson of Jackson imposed a curfew on that area of Jackson and I was a bus driver at Tougaloo at the time. We had about seventy-five kids over there that had come in to join in on the protest. They were basically stranded so I went back to Tougaloo and got the bus and picked up those kids and you know, sometimes we talk about it; we probably saved some lives. Because they had nowhere to go; the campus was sealed off and they were basically in a two block area, right adjacent to the Jackson State [campus]. The police and the guardsmen were basically there to just wait for the curfew time to come and they were going to lock up everything in sight. That was one instance that I had.

I've been put out of a bowling alley on Interstate 55. That was in '67 also. They told us that black folks just didn't bowl here. There is one across town; you know, this kind of thing, it still exists. There are certain places that don't have "For White Only" on the door, but I think what I would be looking for is if, in the event that I wanted to go to anyplace in this country, I can go. After going, I can be served. I think that that is what a lot of people are saying. They are not saying I want to belong to your yacht club or your health club, but basically I'll need to have that opportunity if I want to. I don't enjoy chess; I don't enjoy a lot of things that tend to show affluence or a better way of life. I like baseball, football, card games. I basically like to be around friends when I am there. I am not going to drink in a hostile environment, and I don't ever want to be in one. So rather than do that, I tend to associate with those people than I can relate to. But if I want to go, I need to know that I can go.

Dr. Morgan: Were you familiar enough with the sit-ins and the demonstrations to talk about the organization and how the methods - you mentioned before that you were trained and there were just little specific things. How did that come about and who did it and where?

Mr. Thompson: Basically, all of the sit-ins in Jackson were sponsored by the NAACP. Maybe eighty-five or ninety percent of them. In their philosophy of nonviolence, you were taught how to approach people, how to - you were taught, in the event that somebody attacks you, how you would protect yourself. Fall on the floor, either cover your head like so, or put your head between your legs, like this. So you make sure



that the stronger forces of your body are the ones hit, rather than get hit in the eyes or something like that.

Dr. Morgan: Where were these sessions held?

Mr. Thompson: They were held in churches, and some of them were held in the Masonic temple. We had ministers and other people showing us what to do, because normally they were the ones out front.

Dr. Morgan: Now, were they mostly local people, or how many outsiders would have been involved?

Mr. Thompson: There were outsiders, but the bulk of the people that actually participated were individual people from Jackson and surrounding areas. Many of them were old. It was surprising, because they felt the heat of the pressure and they know what it means to do the same job that a white man has got and get half as much money, but he is working twice as hard. They have seen all of that and they say, "I want more for my grands, or for my children." I think that kept a lot of the spirit going.

Dr. Morgan: Did you ever cultivate a close enough personal relationship with any of the leaders in the movement, to be able to talk about them and their character and personality? If not, we will just pass over that.

Mr. Thompson: Well, Mayor Evers of Fayette.

Dr. Morgan: Of course, if you don't mind, I would kind of like to leave that and get back to it later.

Mr. Thompson: I was young and basically I was just a starry-eyed black boy in the back. Just following suit. Now my basic relationship has developed, I guess, over the last five years to where, we see one another and we know one another and we talk about common problems. But during that time, I didn't.

Dr. Morgan: Okay, let's move on. When did you first begin to centralize the idea in your mind, consolidate some goals as far as specifics in politics in Bolton? When did that begin to focus?

Mr. Thompson: Well, like I say, Tougaloo kind of put in my mind staying here and doing something for the folk in Bolton. After I finished college and began teaching, I said, "Hey, maybe I ought to run for alderman" and we talked about it. I was young, energetic, and all of them other good things, in terms of wanting to do something for the town. We talked about it; we talked about it for a year.

Dr. Morgan: Now, when you say we - I don't want to interrupt you, but who exactly are you talking about?

Mr. Thompson: Okay, we, my minister, a couple of older people in town that I still go to [for] advice when I really have some difficult problems. My mother, my wife, and this kind of thing. Then, those same ten cats that I mentioned to you before, all of them are still here. They say, "Why don't we do that?" So out of that, I remember the day we qualified.

Dr. Morgan: I don't really remember exactly what we were talking about, but if I could, could I get you to talk about the campaign or your organization and how you set it up and what problems you had and who was involved. Just the specifics of it.

Mr. Thompson: In relation to running for mayor, right?



Dr. Morgan: Right.

Mr. Thompson: I guess the four years I served on the board of aldermen, I was always running for mayor, because the minute books reflect the different kinds of things I wanted to while I was an alderman. The community center, the expansion of city limits, industrial parks and this kind of thing. I never was really able to do it, so I think that deep down in everybody's mind in Bolton, they knew that I was going to run. I wasn't going anywhere. My basic commitment was to try and better human life in the Bolton area. Now, I actually, the first meeting that we had was about ten months before the main election. Something like July. I had a group of people up in my house, not actually discussing the saying that I want to run, but we just raised certain issues in the community that were paramount on people's minds. You know, housing, employment, fire protection, sanitation, and those areas, water, sewage, recreation for the young folks and saying, "Hey, what can we do about it?" So out of those discussions, we started getting people saying, "We need to consider running some people for office," and running people meant white and black people who were right thinking. Not necessarily black.

We started weekly meetings from house to house until eventually, the meetings got up to about forty people, so we shifted it to the local community center, that was built by the people in the community. A stone building, people have a lot of pride about that building because they built that building so there is a big significance in that building. We talked about the whole issue of governmental accountability, so to speak. We concluded from there that the government in Bolton had not been accountable to the citizens in the town. That goes so far as whites too, because they didn't have fire protection, the water and sewage was inadequate, sanitation department was infrequent. But basically we said, "Hey, why don't we run some good folks." So in the process of doing that, we sent out feelers, and if you understand the concept of feelers, that's to test the pulse of the white folk at that time. To see if they would really put down their petty prejudices and work for the betterment of Bolton. The thing that we got back was basically negative.

I imagine that around November, we decided that we were going to have to run somebody; we are going to have to run fourteen blacks. In the process of electing candidates, we had our own mock convention. People brought in names and those names were submitted to the entire body and voted upon and we finally came up with the slate. Now, in the process of that slate, we put together a platform. It was a platform that you couldn't say was a black platform or a white platform. It was just that we were running on the promise that we would do the best of our ability of these things listed that would better Bolton. You know, improve the fire protection, improve the police department, get proper water and sewage and proper housing. Try our damndest to attract industry. The whole thing, because hithertofore, city hall was open three hours a week - one hour on Monday, one hour on Wednesday, one hour on Friday. You can imagine how much planning went on. Zero. We assured them that we would get somebody down here at least to answer the phone; if it is the mayor, okay, that is the kind of commitment that we had. We assured folks that you could come here, whatever problem that you have got, it would be listened to and if we could solve it we would, and if we couldn't, we would refer you to somebody else who could deal with it. Then basically we went about door-to-door canvassing and having different speakers in, Mayor Evers, Representative Clark, Mayor Lucas from Mound Bayou and any number of people to try to get the tempo to where on election day, we would get the people out.

Dr. Morgan: Did you aim your campaign totally for the black population or, obviously, it had to be, basically.

Mr. Thompson: It was basically aimed toward the black community simply [because] we had the numbers, but in the process of aiming in everything that we talked about were common issues with white and black. We weren't invited to any of the white clubs or churches to speak. Although we had what we



called a series of public forums to answer those questions. The whites never did. So basically we just continued to do that. After that, we basically -

Editor's Note: At this point there was a brief interruption.

Dr. Morgan: Let's see, we were talking about the campaign.

Mr. Thompson: Yes, so you know in the process of going to the different churches in Bolton and meeting people on the street and going to their homes, lining up people to start to certain folk that we can't relate to, and this kind of thing. There are certain folks in Bolton that I can't talk to that are black, so we find somebody else black to talk to them, because we are trying to get 100% turnout in the election. We were in the process of training people how to vote, you know, sample balloting and this kind of thing. After the sample balloting, we picked people to work as poll watchers and workers on election day. We trained them separately from everybody else. It was hard work, believe it or not; I lost about ten pounds. [laughter] Men have a lot of mental stuff that you go through. You, now, here you have got genuine desires to help the town and you get all kinds of static from people saying that you are going to bankrupt the town, run all of the white folks out of town. All of that, you know, you get that. You throw that aside, but you get disappointments on that way, but hey, we got elected.

Dr. Morgan: What were your biggest obstacles? What caused you the most problems in that campaign?

Mr. Thompson: The people who would straddle the fence, saying -

Dr. Morgan: Black?

Mr. Thompson: Yes, saying that I am going to vote for some white and some black. But then we had to go through the education thing about, "Would you vote for a man who had a gun at your head and you couldn't make a decision otherwise?" You know, they did not pick the best candidates. We convinced some of them and we got elected. Now, you know that we had a hell of a lot of trouble taking office. There were eight lawsuits that came out of the election and we were three months late taking office. The Judge, Judge Dan Russell said, "Hey, you have been holding those folks out of office long enough." What you all are saying is - they said that we registered people who didn't stay in town and this kind of thing. And they had the books. All we did was ask the folks that stayed in the city limits, and they knew them. I mean, hell, I know every white person in Bolton and I know every black. So it is inconceivable that in a town this small you try to smuggle people in to vote. We had the numerical number. We had about fifty-five percent registered black majority. We concentrated on that, you know. Cultivating that fifty-five percent by saying that, "I'll vote for the fourteen people because they have my interest at heart."

Dr. Morgan: How many of those fourteen were elected?

Mr. Thompson: All fourteen. We defied all kinds of mathematical interpretation because in Mississippi, blacks don't win unless they have about a seventy percent registration. We did our homework. We went to those people who were straddling the fence and spent three or four hours talking to them.

Dr. Morgan: Did you meet intimidation from the whites as you were running?



Mr. Thompson: Yes, I got threatening phone calls and this kind of stuff. During the election I carried a gun. I ain't got - I'm as nonviolent as the next person, but I am going to protect Bennie by all means. Bennie continues to carry a gun, you know, for his own personal safety.

Dr. Morgan: Have you had any close brushes?

Mr. Thompson: No, no. The strange thing is, the phone calls have even stopped now.

Dr. Morgan: Mostly pranks, I guess, but you never can tell.

Mr. Thompson: Yes.

Dr. Morgan: Since you have taken office after fighting through that.

Mr. Thompson: Yes, we have been able to do some stuff, you know, basic things that any town ought to have. We have created a planning commission, a parks and recreation committee. We begged two garbage trucks, and I mean beg. We have got two garbage trucks now and we haven't paid a penny for [them]. We didn't even have a garbage truck before.

Dr. Morgan: Where were you able to get it?

Mr. Thompson: We got them from Detroit and the city of Jackson. We got a fire truck in Detroit now that is waiting on us. Sometime this month we are going to have to go get [it]. We put policemen through school. We set up a legal court system. I don't know if you have ever been locked up, or given a ticket and had to go to a JP. Those JP's can really be difficult.

Dr. Morgan: I've heard of that; I've never had to deal with them.

Mr. Thompson: We set up a constitutional court system. You have got the opportunity to bring your lawyer with you; if not, we will appoint one for you. We have done - we've opened Bolton City Hall at least eight hours. I usually leave here at ten or eleven at night, according to what I got going. I have got a youth council that is darn good. The boy is here now, the president of the youth council. He comes around all of the time. We sent three youth council members to Miami for a drug training thing. They are coming back with all kinds of ideas that they want to do. That is what it is about; we are here to help them.

Dr. Morgan: Now, let me ask you this: What has been the reaction of whites in the community to the black administration?

Mr. Thompson: Basically a wait-and-see attitude.

Editor's Note: At this point there was a brief interruption.

Dr. Morgan: I was asking you about the white reaction. Obviously, I would doubt if there would be much open cooperation.

Mr. Thompson: Yes, it would be very little. The letters I just signed - we have a clean-up day next Saturday and we are inviting some whites to serve on the cleanup committee. There ain't nothing controversial about a clean-up committee, right. But, hey, we have got to start somewhere, by inviting



them to participate on that. Hell, they have got garbage and trash just like we have. So if I can get them to give us a smidgen of support, it will help. I'm not saying that I want them four years from now to vote for me or whoever runs for mayor. All I want them to do is just do stuff for the town. Regardless to who is there.

Dr. Morgan: Did you try to bring any of them into your administration at the beginning or did you feel like that was fruitless?

Mr. Thompson: We had a nasty court battle, and that kind of put a little more fuel to the fire. Because there was always talk in the town. If we had been elected and gone in quietly, I think it would have been better, but we had a nasty court battle. But we won and that still hasn't healed. Say, we beat the banker, the president of the bank, the chairman of the board of the bank, the richest land owner in this section of town. So we beat - what I am saying, the rich folks. The man that works every day is scared. He's got a note at the bank and if he comes in and tries to help us, the man is going to foreclose on him, or he might be staying on the property owner's land, and he might tell me to get off because I don't have a lease or anything. You've been living here from year to year, do you see what I am saying. Of course, that kind of hostility that is being put forth now, when folks come down here, it's different. The only thing that I've got a pet peeve about, simply because I think it's good, is when the secretary or somebody calls, once we get on a friendly basis, it has always been in writing. I don't care where I am, who I am or what I do. For many whites in Bolton, we have to give them a learning process, as Mayor Thompson. That is because you don't really identify with me. He's going, "Is Bennie back?" And the secretary says, "Who Bennie? You mean Mayor Thompson? No!", that kind of thing. It is a learning process, because when whites get into position, we like to call them Judge, Governor, you know, this kind of thing. There is no difference with a black man. And I am saying that once you get to know that person as your friend, I want you to call him by his first name, because you are his friend, but until we develop that kind of relationship, it is strictly business.

Dr. Morgan: In terms of carrying out your administration, what have been the biggest problems so far?

Mr. Thompson: Money. I mean, you can have all kinds of dreams and if you don't have the financial backing, those dreams aren't worth a darn. We have been able to raise, outside of our regular city budget, about thirteen thousand dollars.

Dr. Morgan: Where did you go to find this?

Mr. Thompson: Foundations, friends.

Dr. Morgan: I really want to save your relationship to Mayor Evers, because I don't really think that we have time to cover it. Have you had much contact with other municipal officials?

Mr. Thompson: Yes, in the city and the state. I get along fairly good with Doug Shanks in Jackson, Bob Bellivan, you know, the white official in the state. I know all of the other black mayors personally. I know Representative Clark from Holmes County. I know, I guess, about five of the legislators from Hinds County. Some of the others, I don't even want to meet them, personally. We just don't see eye to eye on nothing, but we have some good folks in there.

Dr. Morgan: Excuse me, but let me just ask you this. I realize that this might change between now and the next time that we talk, but what are your future plans now, both for the city, or the town and then your own personal plans beyond this term.



Mr. Thompson: To be perfectly frank, being a petty politician in a small town, you get to really see what a power is. The power is in the legislature because they dictate the law and eventually, if we get single member districts, I'll run for the legislature, simply because I have a good group of folks behind me here.

Dr. Morgan: Now, is that running for that with your eyes -

Mr. Thompson: Set, that's it.

Dr. Morgan: Set higher?

Mr. Thompson: Hey, no, that's it.

Dr. Morgan: Legislator.

Mr. Thompson: Yes, there ain't no sense in fooling up there. It is still a closed society. You can't run for district-wide or a congressional state office. You will get defeated just because you are black, regardless of your qualifications. Maybe twenty, thirty years from now it will be different, but right now that is the tune of the terms.

Dr. Morgan: Again, I want to thank you for taking the time today, and I would like to come back sometime if it is all right.

Mr. Thompson: Oh, no, that's no problem; just give me a call and we will put it together.

Dr. Morgan: Thank you again.