

# Transcribed Excerpts from Oral History Interview with African-American Politician Robert G. Clark, Jr., in Pickens, Mississippi, March 13, 2013

## Excerpt 1

**John Dittmer:** Today is Thursday, March fourteenth, 2013. My name is John Dittmer, and I am here in Pickens, Mississippi, with videographer John Bishop to interview Mr. Robert Clark, the first African American to be elected to the Mississippi House of Representatives in the 20th century. This interview will become part of the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, D.C. Representative Clark, we are delighted to be here today and we thank you for taking the time to talk with us.

**Robert Clark:** It's a pleasure to have both of you here today.

**JD:** Well, thank you. I usually begin the interview by asking the participant to talk about their family, and I'll do that, but I'm going to start this one by asking you to talk about this house that we're in now.

**RC:** This house—I was born in this house. My father built this house approximately a hundred years ago, and this is the only address that I have ever had. I have never left this place.

**JD:** Tell us about the history of the house and the family.

**RC:** Well, my great-grandparents were slaves on this same property that we own today. And after slavery, my great-grandfather's former slave master sold him the property, and it has been in the family ever since.

## Excerpt 2

**JD:** Well, I see in the '50s you taught for seven years at the Humphreys County Training School in the Delta. Is that correct?

**RC:** That was the Humphreys County Training School in the Delta. And while I was at the Humphreys County Training School in the Delta, I think the year was nineteen and fifty-six, I believe it was, '56 or '57, but when we were getting ready for baccalaureate services, we went into Belzoni, me and another black instructor, to get our hair trimmed that night. And when I got up out of the chair, Reverend Lee took my seat. He was sitting there waiting next. And when we got to the baccalaureate services the next morning, we had a young lady that lived in Belzoni going to our school, and she broke the news to us that Reverend Lee had been killed, you know, had been shot about two houses from the barber shop.

**JD:** And he was shot because he was starting to ask people to register to vote, correct?

**RC:** Because he was asking people to register to vote, and that's why he was shot and killed. And it is my understanding that some of the individuals that may have known something about it, that their bossman gave them money to send them away from here.

**JD:** Uh-huh.

**RC:** Um-hmm.

**JD:** Yeah. About that time, the Citizens Council was born, too, in opposition to the Brown decision. Was that a — ?

**RC:** Well —

**JD:** The white Citizens Council — was that a presence in your area? Were you aware of what they were doing? And did they try to interfere in anything that you were doing?

**RC:** Yes, sir, I was very much aware. The Citizens Council was ruling things then. Not the legislature, and not the governor, but it was the Citizens Council ruling things. And I happened to see in the — you know they had the Sovereignty Commission?

**JD:** Um-hmm.

**RC:** I happened to see in that report some years later that the superintendent of Humphreys County reported to the Sovereignty Commission that "I have gotten rid of all of the troublemakers." [Laughs] And I assume I was one of those troublemakers that he was talking about.

**JD:** Oh, I see. Yes, yeah.

**RC:** And another thing. This is not, you know, not talking about me. My father was a schoolteacher. He was fired in Holmes County because he was teaching voter registration classes. Alright, he went to Madison County and taught at Madison-Rosenwald School, principal there for two years. And then, he was fired there, and he could not get another job in Mississippi. See, what they would do, they would take your name and give your name to the Sovereignty Commission. That Sovereignty Commission would send those names to all of the superintendents of education.

**JD:** We should probably say here that the Sovereignty Commission was an agency appointed by the state, and it was really a secret police, wasn't it?

**RC:** That's right!

**JD:** And they had files on practically everybody.

**RC:** That's right.

**JD:** So, it was really dangerous to be a teacher and to say anything that went against the white supremacist system.

**RC:** Well, they — you know, most teachers, or lots of teachers, you know, allow their manhood or personhood to be taken away from them. But never was I going to allow my manhood or my personhood to be taken from me.

**JD:** Um-hmm.

**RC:** For example, over at Louise, when we got our first set of new books in the library, he sent word down — I was assistant principal — for there is a book in the library with a picture of a black rabbit and a white rabbit on the back of it, and for me to pull that book and bring it to his office immediately. Said if black children see that, they will get the idea that they are supposed to play with white children. And I sent word back to the superintendent, "If you want that D-AM-N book pulled, you'll have to come by here and pull it yourself." *[Laughter]*

**JD:** And you kept your job!

**RC:** Well, no, I — you know. I guess that led up to my termination, which was fine.

**JD:** So, it was just very difficult. Your father and you and probably others who dared to say what you meant and what you believed were likely to get in trouble and pay for it.

**RC:** Yes, sir. And I remember my granddaddy, what I was talking about when I was small, he'd get up at the church and be telling folk about they should register to vote and do this and that and the other. And I'd see folk walking out. I was about three or four years old. "Old Man Clark going get somebody killed." And I was wondering, you know, "Ain't no white folk here. How they going know it?" But I didn't know at that time that folk go back and tell white folk everything.

**JD:** Yeah, the Sovereignty Commission had black agents.

**RC:** Yes, um-hmm.