AN ORAL HISTORY

with

CLARENCE E. MAGEE

This is an interview for the Mississippi Oral History Program of The University of Southern Mississippi. The interview is with Clarence E. Magee and is taking place on November 30, 2012. The interviewer is Joseph Wise.

Wise: Hi, this is Joseph Wise with The University of Southern Mississippi’s Center for Cultural Heritage and Oral History and today is November 30, 2012. We have with us today Mr. Clarence Magee, and we are going to talk to him a little bit about some issues with the civil rights era in the 1960s in South Mississippi, and his career as an educator, and any other topic that he chooses to share with us today. Mr. Magee, welcome.

Magee: Thanks for being invited.

Wise: Yes, sir. Our pleasure.

Magee: OK.

Wise: I guess we’ll—the Center already has an interview with you dated from 1997. And we’d like to basically kind of refresh some—just a little basic background information on you such as biographical—where you were born, your name and so forth. And if we could just start out with your name and how it is spelled and also your birth date and a little bit about your family upbringing, real quickly.

Magee: I’m Clarence Magee, and that’s spelled C-L-A-R-E-N-C-E, middle name is Edward, E-D-W-A-R-D, last name Magee, capital M-A-G-E-E. I was born in Marion County in 1932; May 14, 1932. However, my birth certificate will show May 15, 1932. That’s not bad. So I celebrate two days.

Wise: That’s excellent! And also, you grew up and went to school in Marion County?

Magee: I grew up in Marion County. Our post office box was from Sumrall.

Wise: OK.

Magee: My Dad was a farmer. When I was born, up until I reached the age of probably about ten or eleven, my dad was a sharecropper. He purchased his first plot of land, forty acres, with little or no farming lands, so he literally used an axe. Chopped down trees, chopped up limbs, and we would come home after school and
pile those limbs and burn them up, clearing off a place that he could farm. In the meantime, he had a distant relative whose property adjoined his that had acreage that he could farm without any attachment to it. That’s sort of like the beginning there, and I’m sure I’m missing something in between that I may have talked about before.

**Wise:** Right.

**Magee:** OK, when I was born, we lived across the lane from my daddy’s mother. We lived in a house that was up off the ground, had a picket-type roof on it that had holes in it that on a clear night you could lie in bed and see the stars, and on a rainy night the rain just came in on you, you had to set out pails to catch the water. In the floor, there were cracks in the floor, and the house was high enough off the ground that in the wintertime pigs and goats would come near where you had your fireplace to keep warm. We could poke them through the cracks of the floor. We thought we had a good living at that time. But the family farm, whom my dad sharecropped with, were teachers. So in the fall of the year they would go and live in the teacher’s home where the man taught school, and we would move into their house because their house was much closer and tighter than ours, and we’d live there during the wintertime. Now, that’s after several years that that happened. And it was just that kind of relationship that we had. This was a white family that I’m talking about, with them at that time. Now, you give me a little guidance as to what you want.

**Wise:** OK.

**Magee:** The direction that you want me to go, because I might have covered this before.

**Wise:** Let’s talk a little about education. Did that relationship influence a later decision to enter a career in education?

**Magee:** That situation brought back a vow that my dad had made to himself and God, even before we were birthed. He worked farm work on other people’s farms. And he was getting, I think, maybe seventy-five cents per day. He went over to the owner of the farm, house, on a Saturday morning—now, forgive me if I get something crossed up, because I am thinking of some other things—but, anyway, he went over to borrow some money to go to town that day. He sat there under a tree. The owner and a friend of his sat on their porch talking. They sat there practically all day. The owner knew why my daddy was there. He said to his friend, “Do you see that old darkie sitting under that tree? He’s worth twenty-five dollars a day to me.” And my daddy was only earning seventy-five cents a day. My daddy vowed at that point that if he married and had a family, if he was worth twenty-five dollars a day to that man, his children could be worth that and more to him. That’s before he marries. But one day he was taking me to the field of the man that he was sharecropping with. Passing by the window, the lady of the house said to her son, “That boy is getting big enough to plow. You have to buy him a mule.” My daddy remembered the vow he had made. He made another vow that I, at that time, his son, would never plow a furrow in their
field. From that point on he started seeking land for himself that he could develop. Now, prior to that—here again, this is when my daddy was—I don’t know if he was a teenager at the time, but my daddy’s father did a lot, not by choice but by need, he did a lot of hiring himself out to various farmers, clearing land and that kind of thing, then he would use my dad and his sister to do what we ended up doing; getting the limbs, burning them. And he said to my dad and my dad’s sister, “If you guys work real hard this week, come Monday morning you all can go to school.” They were so excited about going to school, that Monday morning they got up, took care of all of their chores, got dressed and they sat out front waiting to go to school. When my dad’s father woke, he says to his wife, “Wake the children up. We’ve got to go to work.” She said to him, “Those children have been up. They are out there waiting to go to school.” My dad’s father said, “Nobody go to school here today, I have a new contract that they are going to help me fulfill.” My dad said he cried because he wanted to go to school just that bad. So he was determined—here again—this is before he’s a teenager, this is before he worked for seventy-five [cents] per day. He vowed then if he had children, they would go to school. He had a family of six children by my mother. There would have been nine except my mother died birthing the eleventh child, so they ended up—I mean ten children—I said that wrong, ten children. Total of ten children by my mother. He challenged us over and over again, when we were not working, on days when it was raining, read. Read, read. Nine of us have college degrees, master’s; nobody went to a doctorate degree, but only one did not finish college, but she got two years of college anyway. All ten of us own homes, we were not renters. So our motivation to go to school came from him being denied the privilege, when he was a child, to go to school, because his father did not value education to that extent. I remember when I completed high school he said, “You can’t stop here. There will come a time when a high school diploma will not be of much value to you.” So, therefore, I was the first in my family to go to Alcorn College, at that time. It’s Alcorn State University now. And then when I got a degree there, he encouraged us to go further, so we were successful to the extent that my dad was a great motivator. He used the field labor, from having to get up in the morning, get wood to warm our home by, get wood to cook, bring water from a spring, drinking, cooking, taking a bath, feeding the livestock, those that couldn’t go to the spring. Getting up at daybreak when we were large enough to work, to go to the field to work, and it took discipline. We were disciplined—and I tell the people—we would discipline our hands when it comes to picking cotton that it became sort of like mechanical. We could get the cotton out. In the process of disciplining our hands, we could discipline our minds. That discipline translated into being disciplined in study. Because we worked as long as the sun was shining, the weather was not bad, and then—like I said—on the bad days or at night, he challenged us to read. To read. To read. He had no education, but he had what people referred to as “mother wit” and he had a determination. He was committed. First of all, to taking care of his children, and bringing them up so that they would be able to take care of themselves. I used to make the mistake of saying that my first real employment was when I took a job as a teacher, but my first real employment was with my daddy, for my daddy. He bargained with us to pay us one cent per pound of cotton. We developed our skill of picking cotton until those __________—one or two just couldn’t do it. But for the
larger—we could all pick two hundred pounds of cotton a day. That’s two dollars a day. That was more than he made a day when he was working on it. We could keep it for ourselves! We were still eating at home, sleeping at home. We would do our own weighing and not cheat him. We kept our own books and did not cheat him. So we developed a trust. We developed dependability. My dad could get us started to doing a job, and he could go on and do something else. He did not have to worry about it being done. Now, when he came back, if the job was not done correctly, he would show us how to do it correctly and we’d end up doing it correctly. That’s sort of like being at the beginning stage of our lives.

**Wise:** That’s very interesting. And then did this work ethic inform your education?

**Magee:** It translated into it, yes.

**Wise:** Right. And then your career—let’s talk a little bit about your career as an educator, and maybe its relationship in how it developed during the Civil Rights Movement—its relationship with the Civil Rights Movement.

**Magee:** OK. Having had my dad as a mentor, his relatives, his friends knew my daddy’s intent and his motives for his children. We could never be away from my dad, out of his sight, and feel safe in doing what an average person would do, taking chances and that kind of stuff. But back to the work ethics—when I finished at Alcorn State University, of course I had been deferred from going into service. I was drafted a couple of months after that, went into service and spent two years; one year was in Germany.

**Wise:** This would be around the Korean War era, the ’50s?

**Magee:** I am a Korean [War] veteran. Yes, I went in in 1954, came out in 1956. And when I came out, I set up residence in Hattiesburg. Matter of fact, while I was in Germany, my stepmother’s sister owned a house here in Hattiesburg and they were transferred to somewhere else, so my daddy and my wife—I married while I was in service—my dad and my wife did the transaction and purchased the house in our name. And when I came back, he was aware of the fact that if you owned property, you had a right to pay a poll tax, register to vote. When I came back, in the first year I went to pay poll tax, I made an attempt to register to vote. A lot of people attribute that kind of movement to having served abroad, fighting for somebody else’s freedom. So you realize that you’re not free yourself, so you come back and you want to exercise your freedom as a citizen, and that happened to quite a few people who had gone into service and came back. But when I paid that first poll tax and then went to the clerk’s side where the voter registration was, I was met at the counter by a deputy of the clerk. And she asked what I was there for. I told her what I was there for, to register to vote. She said, “The registrar’s not in.” I said, “Can you tell me what time he’ll be in?” She said, “He does not maintain a schedule.” She left. There was nobody there for me to talk to, so I left.
I went back the next year to pay the poll tax and I made the same request. And this time I was met at the counter by the same deputy. She turned around and shouted in the back, “You need to come up here. This guy wants to see you.” His name was Cox, at that time, so he came up—

Wise: Was this in the Hattiesburg area?

Magee: Oh, yes. He came up and says, “Who are you?” I told him. He said, “What you want, boy?” I told him. He said, “Who sent you, boy?” I said, “Nobody.” He simply said, “You’ve got to wait,” and turned around and walked away. Well, I went through that ritual ten times. Eventually I managed to—of course, those two times it was with Cox—wait a minute, was it Cox? Let me get it straight. Theron Lynd is the one who did talk to me and gave me the most trouble, but I’m trying to say this guy’s name was Cox. I’ll stick with that for the time being.

Wise: OK.

Magee: I might have to correct that. (laughter)

Wise: That’s fine.

Magee: [I] might have to correct that. But anyway, in the meantime, I got a job in Waynesboro teaching school. I’d go over on Monday morning and live over there until Friday evening and I’d come back. And I continually—each time I paid tax I’d go by and attempt to register to vote. I worked at Waynesboro that particular year. I believe that was the year that Vernon Dahmer was killed. So then now my interest and concern grows a little bit stronger and deeper. I did not call myself trying to—let’s say—be a pioneer for myself. I really wanted my rights, but my primary objective was to be sure that when my two girls were old enough to exercise their right to vote, that they would not have to experience what I experienced. I’ll tell you that experience later on. But these were the kind of things that motivated me. My dad introduced me to the idea that you are supposed to have the right to do it, and I’m not sure that he was—I think that he got his right to vote after I got mine. And then the death of Vernon Dahmer. I knew the Dahmers’ two older sons. I was in school with them. I didn’t know the father that much, but I knew them. So that had a whole lot to do with the direction that that took me in my life. I worked the year there, and then I worked two years at the Prentiss Institute, a junior college.

Wise: And that’s located in Prentiss?

Magee: In Prentiss. It’s no longer in operation.

Wise: OK. Are they—this is just an aside—are they restoring that?

Magee: I understand there is some effort—
Wise: OK.

Magee: —to restore it. I think there is one building in use there now. At one time—I don’t know whether it was occupied by the Friends of Children, that’s a Head Start program. But I’ve heard there were efforts to restore that school. And then I came here to Hattiesburg at Grace Love Elementary School. Now, in my teaching, I did as much teaching life skills as I did teaching from the book. Oh, little simple things teaching—and this is sixth and seventh grade—teaching them about checking accounts, teaching them about how to write a check, teaching about health hygienes, observing—I thought about this the other day—observing whether or not a child is getting right down on their desk to read, or knowing that there is something wrong with their eyes.

Wise: Right.

Magee: And as teachers we could do that. If we saw a child that was slow for some reason, we tried to figure out what it is then refer that child to the appropriate agency that could give them benefits. Mentoring the boys. Taking boys out to the country, letting them see what country life was like. Taking them down in the fields. Taking them down into the pastures to see the cows. These are city kids. That we did, you know, investing ourselves. Reinventing in them what had been instilled in us, work ethics.

Wise: Right.

Magee: And that kind of thing. I enjoyed teaching. I loved it. I left Grace Love and I went to Lillie Burney [Elementary School]. Lillie Burney opened up—we went the year Lillie Burney opened up; seventh, eighth, and ninth grade, I believe it was. I taught science there.

Wise: OK.

Magee: I meet children today, and they remind me of some of the habits I had. In the meantime, I must admit that when I first started teaching school, being a green teacher, you really don’t know what to do, because you can’t apply on the job what the book says.

Wise: Right.

Magee: Because books, at that time, were written for a little more cohesive, ideal situations. So that’s where we bring in a lot of our experiences in to teach the life skills. To help children to understand just basic life issues. But anyway, I meet kids today that went to Lillie Burney, that went to Prentiss Institute, went to Waynesboro—I know a young lady well today that I taught. I taught school, but then I coached basketball. Matter of fact, she is on our board at the NAACP. And we often have a chuckle because she was not too well coordinated. She was clumsy. But she always
laughed. She always laughed. And I tell her, I said, “You were a good basketball player, but you just couldn’t stand up!” (laughter) We get a big kick out of that. In the elementary school, I meet kids today and say, “You did this for me, you said—” this or that and another. And so I ask, “Hey, it must have been worth it.” From Lillie Burney—a couple of years ago they were having a Euro [school] function and they have it every two years now. I attended and I was mingling with the crowd. A young lady came up behind me and she made an expression, “Read the book.” She repeated, “Read the book.” I turned around and looked at her. I recognized her as a student. And she said, “That’s what you always said to us, ‘Read the book. Read the book.’” I met a young man; the last time I heard from him he was in Denton, Texas, he’s a PhD. He says, “I didn’t go into science because as a science project at Lillie Burney we had to take a cat, euthanize the cat, and take all the flesh off its bones to get to the skeleton so that we could identify the parts.” He said that stuck with him. “That drove me into another area, but I will never forget that.” I met a young lady from Prentiss Institute. It was at the service station up here at [Highway] 49 and [Interstate] 59. She came by and she identified herself. She said, “I am a doctor in English,” or something like that, “but I did not go into math because I could never—” What was it? “I could never satisfy you in math,” or something like that. But, you know she recognized me for having been sort of like a mentor in life. So this is where the payoff comes back there. Now, the civil rights involvement, I guess they basically started with attempting to register to vote, which I did ten times. I have the poll tax to show it. And then the Vernon Dahmer situation. I became a member of the NAACP somewhere about 1960—let me back up, it would have been earlier than that—’56, ’57, something like that, because a member of our church at that time was president of the branch, so it took us—so I’ve been a member of the NAACP since then.

Wise: What was the name of your church?

Magee: St. James CME Church over on Seventh Street. Seventh and Atlanta Street. It is one of the churches that, during Freedom Summer, students would come in and hold classes. Students from all over the country would hold classes and have meetings at that church. But it’s historic from the ’64 movement. So, in my school situation, I was president for the Hattiesburg School Teachers Association. At that time, we had two associations, one black and one white. Superintendent Speakes(?) at that time, was a principal—oh, by the way, before I go there, my last year of teaching was at Rowan High School. Grace Love, Lille Burney, Rowan High School.

Wise: How do you spell that last?

Magee: Which one?

Wise: Rowan?


Wise: Rowan.
Magee: The teacher’s association met. We put down some mission statements for the association, and a couple of other things, getting prepared to invite Superintendent Speakes to a meeting to share some things on what our thoughts were about education and teaching and all of that. Well, somebody from that group apparently shared the information with him without our permission. So he called a meeting at Rowan High School of all the teachers in the city school system. And he said, for example, I want you there at three o’clock. We assembled there at three o’clock. And, say, three to five minutes after three o’clock he walks in, walks on the stage and he just let us have everything that was on his mind. And he walks off, leaving us sitting there with our mouths [open]—“Huh, what happened?” Of course, we knew somebody had spoken with him—I was president at that time. I received an offer to work for the Mississippi Southern Planning Development District. The office was located here in Hattiesburg at that time. At that time, my teaching contract probably would have called for between three and four thousand dollars a year. I was offered seven thousand dollars a year. It was attractive enough for me to sit down and analyze the situation. Stay in the teaching field, subject to the superintendent at the end of the year saying, “I don’t have a position for you.” We had no tenure. Taking a chance going over here making twice the money, subject to the same thing happening. Which, it could happen. So I chose to go there and stayed a couple of years with them. We were receiving grants. I was paid from grant money. When the grant that I was paid under ran out, I was called in and says, “The grant is out, you can stay”—At this time, now, my salary has almost doubled. “—you can stay with us at half the salary.” On the spot I says, “OK.” But then there was another black gentleman working out there as well. His name was Vernon—not Vernon—Kenneth Boings(??spelling??). He and I, with two summer students working with us, went to Gulfport to do a survey. And this side of Gulfport, this side of Lyman, there is a huge church on the right hand side; waterfall coming down. Do you know where I’m talking about?

Wise: It’s on Highway 49 going south.

Magee: Yes.

Wise: I’ve been past it many times.

Magee: Yeah. We stopped there—because Kenneth had been in there before—we stopped there, and the gentleman who was building that church, he and his wife gave us a tour of that church. And in the process he emphasized, first, it was non-denominational; second, the church framework was up, the top was on the church, there was not a whole lot needed to be finished with that church. He got the idea while he was a resident out west—I can’t remember what state that he was in—but he asked God to show him a spot for a church out of the city, and his mind settled on Gulfport. He came down there. He bought a trailer he lived in, and he would go out looking for an appropriate spot. Found that spot. The price of the spot—now, before coming to Gulfport he had sold what he had. And he came, following what he said God was directing him to do, found the spot, and the price of the spot he could pay for
by selling his trailer spot and moving out there and putting up a little chapel. It may still be back there. But when he put it up, the dimensions that were revealed to him, he put that building up, doors, windows, ceiling tacks and everything, without having to cut a block, without having to cut one of those ceiling things, and he dug a well; had a pump, a little pump house out there. This is the year that Hurricane Katrina hit, and he said that people from the community came to the little house for shelter. All night long they could hear banging. The wind was beating something. It was the pump house door opening and closing. The wind was opening and closing it. They had one light out there, and that light was on a pine tree. The trees and things snapped around it, but that tree bent over, and when the sun came out it pulled it back up. Never had a fund raiser for that building. For example, he says when [he] got ready to put the rafters on, wherever he ordered the rafters from—he had a little money but he ordered all that he needed—when the rafters were delivered to him, the amount of—they didn’t deliver everything—the amount that was delivered was equal to the amount of money he had on hand. He said somebody in the neighborhood called him and said, “I want you to go by a store. I left a package for you.” Said he went by the store, picked up the package, and in the package was enough money to pay for the rest of the rafters when they were delivered. And in the process of putting the sheetrock on that house, there was a homeless man who showed up and he could do carpentry work. He needed a place to sleep. They provided a place to sleep in the little house. And his pay was to put that sheetrock on that building. He said he worked there until he got on, and when every time he got ready to smoke, he would come down off the house and go outside the fence that surrounded it and smoke. And when they finished the building, the man just disappeared. He never saw him again. But he do believe that he talked to him because he had a call from somebody in Tennessee, I believe he said Tennessee. The voice that he heard was the same voice that he had experienced when that man was there. OK. That building has a white quartz rocks, like quartz, and at that time the only place they could be located was in Arkansas. There was a couple, a young couple that came to the Gulf Coast. I don’t know whether they got married there, but anyway, when they were on their way back they stopped by there just reviewing it. They were from the area of Arkansas where the rocks are quarried. They gave him an address where to go to and they left. And before he got ready to leave, he lost the address, but anyway he went to Arkansas and went straight to the place. So those rocks come from Arkansas. Now, what I’m saying in this, he said he never moved until the Lord had revealed it to him every step of the way. On the back of that building is a little—I guess for lack of a better name—is a prayer room. You go up the stairs in the back of the room, in the prayer room, and in that room there’s a table like this. And it’s got oak—made out of oak—not one piece of oak, but oak from all over, where ever you could get it. At the head of that table is a chair, and he has it draped in purple representing the God sitting there. Around that table, not chairs like this, but little benches, kneeling benches. And when he and the officers come into that place, the first order of service is to pray, and no business will be taken care until there is a oneness in that building. Now, I’m listening to all of this. I’m listening to all of this. So when I come back to Hattiesburg, I called Les Newcombe, and I volunteer fired myself from my job and says, “When business picks up, call me back.”
Wise: Now, this is from the NAACP president position or?

Magee: No.

Wise: What position did you fire yourself from?

Magee: I fired myself from employment.

Wise: Oh, OK.

Magee: Employment.

Wise: OK.

Magee: See, initially I told him I’d take it.

Wise: Right.

Magee: But when I had this personal experience—

Wise: OK.

Magee: Even the man’s wife, as she took us through the building she says, “Is the Lord dealing with you?” I say, “Yeah, He is.” So when I came back, I fired myself. And the thought that occurred to me, God always provides for you. He provided for Abraham. Abraham didn’t know where he was going, but he went. And the other thing I thought was that to accept the offer in employment that was made for me was like I’m saying, I’m begging, I need a hand out. I’m not above begging, but I do—and I tell boys this today—men don’t beg, men work. I’m here to tell boys today. I mentored some boys today. But then that brings me back around to the point then—let me back up—I was president of NAACP at that time, so I was president twice. From ’71-’74 I was president of NAACP. When I made the decision that I would not come back just for half of what I was getting—matter of fact, during that whole process—and this is in between—when I took the job I said to Les Newcombe, “I will not be bringing you information from the community. I’m not taking the job, so you really don’t expect me to do that.” It was on that job that I wrote a letter to then governor—I want to say Bill Waller—and I have to look at my letter to make sure it’s the right governor.

Wise: Was that like early ‘70s?

Magee: Yeah.

Wise: That sounds about—
Magee: That’s following the murder of Vernon Dahmer, because a couple of guys had been tried for—and they were not, I mean—and one guy in particular was sent to prison. Bill Waller set him free, saying that he had a skill that the community needed. I wrote him a letter on that job and I got the secretary to type the letter up, and never really, I mean, I don’t know what they expected. She typed the letter up just like I wrote it, and I sent it to the governor and I sent it to the newspaper, because we were so appalled that here is a man who’s part of a murdering group who murdered Vernon Dahmer and you have set him free. I have a copy of that letter here someplace. But anyway, so that’s still, that’s my involvement in civil rights. I guess that’s the biggest—even when Vernon Dahmer was killed, some of us would go up to his place at night and watch. We would go up in twos and park up the highway or down the highway and just watch the cars pass by. I went up and I was with—he’s dead now—Brother Charles Phillip. He and I went up and did a night watch. Watching their, well, it was watching because the house was burned down. I don’t know if they were living in a part of the store at that time or not. But we did pull watch on that. But back to telling the guy I would not work for a lesser salary—I went to Sears Roebuck, and the manager at that time says, “I’ve been wanting to talk to you.” And I said, “OK, I’m here. What do you want to talk to me about?” He said, “I need to hire some more African Americans here.” I said, “Well, I’m looking for a job.” He said, “You go back there and somebody will give you a test.” So I took the test and I worked for Sears Roebuck part time, oh, a year maybe. And in the meantime, I was selling Amway products, so that’s where my income—but, now, during all of this I also was taking correspondence courses as to how to qualify, well, how to pass federal exams. I took an exam for postal service, I took an exam for Mississippi Employment Service; I think I took another exam. But none of those came through until I was offered a job with the federal government. Then after I got that offer, there were others that came through, but I took the job with the federal government. I had to move to Mobile to do it, but then I ended up in Mobile. Now, let’s see if I can bring this back now. You asked me about the education, how we got into that and that kind of thing, so—

Wise: And we talked a little bit about how, basically, your education career and your work ethic and everything has influenced your involvement with civil rights. And then we kind of—

Magee: Well, it has a great, great, great—I have a passion for education. I’m not far from it. I do a lot of community service work. Right now, today, my wife and I—first of all, when I came back to Hattiesburg, I was still employed with the federal government, but my job site was in Jackson. But I worked the whole southern part of the state.

Wise: What year was this?

Magee: Department of Agriculture.

Wise: What year?
Magee: I started with the federal government in 1974 and I retired in 1998. But, in 1975 we came back over to Hattiesburg, but I was still working in Jackson at that time. My wife started doing mentor work at Grace Christian. I did a little of that. Then, since we lived near Grace Love, we mentored at Grace Love. Our church has since adopted Grace Love. For the last five years, we and the church have been giving a computer to the top reader in the class over there. The last two years we’ve been giving two laptops or two computers, and from that connection—we live near the project—we mentor primarily boys, because that’s where my interests lie. Now, at the elementary level—all of the way through the high school—but I focus more on the elementary level. And why—the reason I do that, for six years I was part of jail ministry. That’s after you got in trouble. So my thought, now, is to catch them before they get in trouble. It’s less expensive. It’s easier to do than to try to put one back together once he’s gotten into trouble. So, we mentor ninth graders, tenth graders, twelfth graders. I let them come over and rake my leaves because I stress the idea that men don’t beg. Men earn money. They work. So, if they rake my leaves, I’ll pay them more than what it is worth. But, they come—they have a need—they come to me and say, “I need some work.” They don’t come to me and say, “I need a dollar or two dollars.” They don’t do that. Even the third graders and fourth graders, they don’t come to me and saying, “I need a dollar or something—I want to do some work.” That’s where my interest is in education.

Wise: As far as the—your education career and everything—let’s talk a little bit about how that. Let’s get your perspective on the state of education now and what you think your experiences in the civil rights era, how—basically—what’s different between now and then and how did that, how did the civil rights era influence what’s going on today, if it did.

Magee: The civil rights era served its purpose—well the civil rights era is never over—

Wise: Right.

Magee: Let me back up and say that. Most people here refer back to ’64 and think everything stopped in ’64. The school integrations took place here in the late ’60s, early ’70s. There are big benefits, but in the process, we’ve lost a whole lot. We’ve gained a whole lot, but we’ve lost a whole lot. We’ve lost icons. Grace Love was a center for that neighborhood. The principal was a black man who the neighborhood looked up to. He was a clearing place for all—whatever information they needed came from that neighborhood. People attended PTA meetings because they could walk to them.

Wise: What was that gentleman’s name?

Magee: Percy Bailey(?spelling?).

Wise: OK.
Magee: Percy Bailey. Yeah. You could walk to the—I lived in the neighborhood. Other teachers lived in the neighborhood. We don’t have the neighborhood presence of teachers now. They drive in. They try to do their job.

Wise: They commute.

Magee: Right. And you don’t have the kind of background experience that I had because I came up in the culture. I understood what we needed because of what we didn’t have. I’m not sure the teachers understand that. I actually—you’re dealing with two cultures now. You’ve got the “middle class”—quote, unquote—but then you’ve got the—but the classroom is made up of a lesser class. So there is a language barrier there. You are trying to move this group of children into a culture that they have not experienced. So, tests are not built on the culture from which your children come from. Somebody else somewhere else built those tests. So there is a disconnect. So with the schools basically being moved from the neighborhood to another location, you had a great loss in that because when I could walk to school and see about my child, I could be there. But, now I’ve got to drive across town; to have transportation. Or, maybe I had a bad experience in school myself so the interest in my child’s education is predicated on the experience that I had, so I won’t be interested. A lot of factors enter into—a lot of the support we had when we were separate, we don’t have when we are equal. We gave up a lot just to be equal.

Wise: We’re talking about desegregation.

Magee: Right, right. Rowan Elementary School was an icon. It was a high school. It was a high school. It’s now an elementary school. That can be pointed out all over—that the Jones Elementary School—teachers don’t have freedom to be creative. Somebody else gives them a plan and says, “You stand before your class. You read this off to your kids until everybody gets it the same.” Boys and girls don’t learn the same way. I know that from personal experience, because I was a boy. But, it took me getting out to be an old man to truly, truly recognize that. Boys and girls don’t learn the same way.

Wise: Right.

Magee: Boys need to be able to explore. But, then you’re supposed to be able to direct that in a positive kind of way. If you bring them in and you try to take all that away from them—all the girls, I could give my girls some paper and some scissors, some jacks, something like that, and they could entertain themselves all day long and would not tear up the house. You expect a boy to do that? It doesn’t happen that way! He’s got to have some place to explore. But, if you can—if you are aware of that and if you are allowed to be creative you can help them to be creative. That’s one thing we lost in the school system itself, the ability to be creative, the ability to do critical thinking. They’ve even taken the ability to do critical thinking away from teachers because somebody gives them the plan and says, “You’ve got to do this because
they’ve got to pass a test.” What about the knowledge that’s going to help them to really deal with this new technology and all that kind of stuff? New technology is good, but it comes on us so fast we have not even learned how to use it yet. Then it turns out to be against us. Now, that has no eyes, technology has no eyes. So, what it doesn’t for the poor and underprivileged, it does for the elite. Now, I can give you some examples. Brett Favre is a good example. Made a picture of himself—they said—sent it to one of the persons who worked with him when he was in with the, ah—who was it? The Mets—not Mets!

**Wise:** Oh, the Giants?

**Magee:** Who was it?

**Wise:** The Green Bay Packers?

**Magee:** No. __________. The second time around. Come on. But, anyway—

**Wise:** The Vikings, I believe—

**Magee:** But, anyway. The lady who was giving therapy and all that kind (audio is unintelligible) to players. I guess he sort of liked her and he sent her something. Well, something similar to that happened in the Pine Belt. First, it happened in Columbia High School. A young lady called in a bomb threat. Technology, now. Then it happened in Oak Grove. A young lady called in a bomb threat. Technology. It happened at South Forrest, then it happened at Hattiesburg High School. I’m here at Hattiesburg High School so I know what happened, see. These are some of the things that happen in school that can, if used right, enhance the learning. But, if you don’t understand it, and then you are not free to be creative in using it, then it works against you.

**Wise:** Right.

**Magee:** How is it different from then to now, when I was in school? We had no musical instruments. I learned how to take a cheese crate and stretch a rubber band over it, tighten it up and make a little drum out of it. I learned to take a piece of wood and put some soda bottle caps on it to make a tambourine out of it. Or, just sticks. Creative. Teaching kids to be creative. I learned how to euthanize that cat and take the skin off of it so they could have a real skeleton. Being creative. We had no money. Money is good, but money is not everything.

**Wise:** Right.

**Magee:** There are some things that we really take away from people that would invent things and make more things useful for ourselves. Or maybe we’ve run off from the question—the difference between this and now.
Wise: That’s the answer I was after. That tells the difference in the quality in the creativity, as you say, involved in the education experience. I have a name that I would like to mention and see—I’m sure—are you familiar with a gentleman by the name of Edward Tademy?

Magee: Eddy—Edward Tademy.

Wise: He was a teacher, I believe, at the Eureka school, in the Hattiesburg area.

Magee: The name is familiar but now I’m trying to if I had anything—information that I could really share with you. I don’t think I have.

Wise: The reason that I ask that—being one of you fellow educators back in that era—I did some work with the African American Military Museum, going around surveying cemeteries for African-American veterans, or any veterans located there, and found his grave site and noticed that he was a World War I veteran. And he was also an educator there. So, I did not know if you knew him or not.

Magee: The name is familiar, but I don’t have information.

Wise: I understand.

Magee: Yeah.

Wise: Is there anything else you would like to add about your experiences, and, basically, what you are doing currently, the mentor projects? Do you have anything else going on currently?

Magee: Of course, I’m active in my church. I have been for the last four years—been active with the Bethel Care Family Council. These people who have loved ones out there come together, and in that scenario we do invite various doctors and other people who have any information that deals with health in general, we invite them in to talk about diabetes, talk about cancer, talk about how to dispose of old medicine, talk about ear, eye, and throat. I did that because my step-mother was out there from April of 2006 until December 2010. She passed. Of course, I was president of that council for a while. I also work with the retired federal employees. Right now I serve as vice-president for them. At one time—I served as president a couple of times, but right now I’m serving as vice-president. I’m also involved with AARP. I am now on the executive board with them. Locally, in my church I serve—I wear several hats. We’re a small church. St. James Christian Methodist Episcopal Church. I serve on the steward board. I serve on the trustee board. Member and director of the choir. Sunday school teacher. Church treasurer. Sounds like I’m the only person there, but there are a few of us. (laughter)

Wise: It looks like you are quite busy!
Magee: Apart from being president of the Forrest County branch of the NAACP, incidentally which is the largest branch in the state, I also serve as the third vice-president of the Mississippi state NAACP. I just left there from two days meeting. So, I sort of stay busy.

Wise: Sounds like it! That’s great! Of course, they are talking about—or actually marching forward with the new civil rights museum in the state. And, I would like to know what you think would be a good—based on your experience—what message would you like to see presented by the museum to the public?

Magee: I guess, if you could actually get a hold of what is referred to—they use a different title now—all of the living legacies of the Civil Rights Movement, if you could actually get those persons’ voices on tape, I think it would be a great asset to the museum. They are passing off the scene, you know. And, here there are several events that I’ve been involved with that really came out of the Civil Rights Movement. For example, Francis Street Apartments were built by the Hattiesburg Association for Civic Improvement. We had at one time about fifteen members, basically men of the group. Back in ’67, ’68, ’69, we applied for a grant from HUD and we got over a million dollars to build those apartments. I’m the last living man that was a part of that grant process. We recently sold it because the upkeep got more expensive. None of us had monies—this is federal government money. And it grew out of the Civil Rights Movement. We said we need to get something out of this movement that would benefit our people more than just for right now. It was low rent, supplement housing. Of course, so that’s been for around forty years now that we maintained that building. But as structures get older, the maintenance goes up. Your reserve funds are used up, and we don’t have personal money to put into that. So, we had to get rid of it because we couldn’t bear the burden much longer. Out of that movement came the first community action agency for Forrest County. Hattiesburg Association for Civic Improvement sent two people to Atlanta, Georgia: the Reverend Johnny Cameron and now Dr. James—come on—Jimmy James—who is at Jackson State—sent those two people to Atlanta to secure information about the community action agency. They came back. We—Hattiesburg Association for Civic Improvement—invited several, several young white men to come together with us. [We] put the proposal together, and were ready to send it to Washington when the now retired judge—supreme court judge—state supreme court judge—Pittman appeared with an application together, had all the names on it. He said, “You have to have a biracial group.” But, the only problem for the African Americans that they had on there, they did not know they were on there. So they came to us saying, “All you have to do is sign on to ours and we can walk it through.” Of course, we had a struggle. We never gave in. Now, Hattiesburg had always been Democratic, politically. Mayors. Mayor Grady(?) was the first Republican mayor of Hattiesburg, and now that I know he was trying to get the Republican staff—he was in support of our group. So we got the Forrest, Stone [County] area community action going, which is known as PACE today. I was the secretary for the group. I signed all the payroll checks. Big job! Didn’t get a penny for it. (laughter) I signed all the payroll checks. A lot of people don’t know that. I don’t keep enough paperwork. You know, sometimes you
discard paper. But, I do have one thing. When I got ready to leave here in 1974, they gave me a plaque in appreciation for the service that I served in that particular—now I need to go to PACE Head Start and see what records they have, see (laughter) if they are aware of this. Another thing that happened during the movement, you have probably heard of attorney Al Chambers—Chambers—he was real instrumental in the suit, the Ayers case that showed that the predominant black higher institutions were not receiving their fair share. Of course, they finally won that case and they had to put so much in Alcorn State University, so much in Jackson State University, and so much at Mississippi Valley State University. That case is still alive. The state is skirting the issue, trying not to put the money in there. The first roadblock they put in there, they turned around and demanded that those institutions recruit—increase their non-minority participation—I don’t know what it was—10 percent or 20 percent, which has not been very easy to do. I said that Al Chambers came—and I can’t remember the year—he and I—and of course I was president of the NAACP. I did not use the name of the NAACP, but I used the name, something like “concerned citizen,” for the challenge against WDAM.

Wise: That’s the local television station.

Magee: Yeah. Ms. Jeanette Smith, myself, and Alvin Eaton went out to check with the manager. He was hired on the spot. He became the first African American—to my knowledge—to work at that station. He worked there for years and years. And there is a down side to that. I don’t think I need to put that in here. I’ll just have to keep that to myself. What he attempted to do, after he got the job, was to—he attempted to get me to drop the charges against them with a huge suit. Either I was wise or crazy enough to believe that it couldn’t happen—and I might still have the paperwork—I just sort of ignored it.

Wise: Well, I believe I’ve exhausted my list of questions and if you—do you have anything else you would like to share with us?

Magee: I’ll probably think of something else later on, but I’m pretty satisfied with what you have.

Wise: All right. Well, again, thank you very much for coming in today and talking with us, and we are glad we can add another volume to the Charles Magee story here at the Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage—

Magee: Charles Magee? What Charles Magee? (laughter)

Wise: Clarence! My apologies, sir!

Magee: That’s being recorded and I didn’t want you to get away with that! (laughter)

Wise: I understand! (laughter) Thank you very much. I’ve also got to transcribe so I’ll make sure we get that straight! (laughter)
Magee: I do get confused—I get crossed up with a Charles Magee. And I know him.

Wise: Yes, sir, that’s probably why I’m thinking that. At any rate, thank you very much, Mr. Clarence Magee, for coming in and talking to us today, and I appreciate your time and your patience with us. I’m going to go ahead and stop it right now.

Magee: OK.

(end of interview)