

AU 658

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Interviewee:

Dixon L. Pyles

Interviewer:

John Dittmer


Title:


An interview with Dixon L. Pyles, December 1, 1984/
interviewed by John Dittmer

DITTMER:

Let me just see. This is John Dittmer at the Office of Attorney Dixon Pyles. This is December 1, 1984 in Jackson, Mississippi.~~This~~ toward you because my voice always picks up better for some reason, and I don't want to hear myself. Well, I wanted to talk to you for a couple of reasons. One, because Ed and other people that I run into, and things like some over-cross in my research have all come up with your excellent resource person for that particular period. So, what I would like to do is to talk you some about your own involvement in things, but also about your own observation^s about race and politics during this period of the fifties and the sixties. With that introduction, I wonder if you could just tell me a little ^{bit} about your background in the state, and then I will get more specific.

PYLES:

1,
All right. Well, I was January ~~the first~~, 1913, in Little Rock, Arkansas, and at a very early age, I came to Mississippi and brought my parents with me 

~~DITTMER:~~ Oh, really? 

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~~PYLES:~~

~~and~~ and I graduated from Central High School in Jackson here in 1930. At that time we do what was called, it was a ^{depression} ----- on. My father was a claim adjuster for the Home Insurance Company, and, if you will remember, ^{Phail} ~~McEld~~ and his insurance empire, they had collapsed. So, my family went back to Little Rock, where the employment opportunities for him ^{were} ~~was~~ much better than, or he thought they were, than in Mississippi. I was a freshman in Millsaps, at that time, and so I remained, and have remained here every since.

I / Graduated from Millsaps in 1933 with a / Undergraduate / Degree in just History...

~~DITTMER:~~

~~Oh!~~

~~PYLES:~~

/ Which is, I don't know how valid it is since that time. I immediately took my / Undergraduate / Degree and went to Chicago to the World's Fair and became a ^{Rickshaw puller} ~~rich old poor~~, and I'm not sure, but I believe that I ^{than I've had since.} probably had more spendable income. ~~and~~ ^{then} I came back to Mississippi, and studied law in the Jackson School of Law, and worked on the Federal Writer's Project for the Clarion Ledger. ~~and~~

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DITTMER: Oh really!

~~PYLES:~~ *A* and I was the, probably, for as I can tell, the first radio news broadcaster in 1933 and (34) that Mississippi had.

DITTMER: Oh, were you on WJDX?

PYLES: I was, WJDX, ^o if you will recall, WJDX didn't go on the air until December of 1929, and so, we didn't have very many radio stations at the time. ~~And~~ I then worked ^{for} to the Federal Housing Administration ^o ~~and~~ in 1939, I was admitted to practice law and open my office in 1940, ~~And~~ then in 1942, I went away to military service. I discovered that at Millsaps I had been able to pass calculus and analytical geometry; ~~so~~, the army decided to send me off to an anti-aircraft school ^{which} ~~and~~ had a three ^{phase} ~~phase~~ equation which they ^{when the} thought I could work ~~it~~. ~~When my~~ war was over, I had a regular commission. ~~and~~ I am now a retired ~~-----~~ Lieutenant Colonel, ^e

DITTMER: Oh really!

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~~PYLES:~~

But I have been practicing law, almost, continuously, except ^{for the nearly} ~~the thirty~~ five years in the service, since that time. Now, you know that...

~~DITTMER:~~

Oh well...

~~PYLES:~~

Uneventful. ^I career of Dixon Pyles.

DITTMER:

Well, I don't think it's very much uneventful, as I hope to indicate shortly. One of the things, and I'll be just sort of throwing out my own ideas about the period, and I would, you know, appreciate you when I say this. If anything you want to say to add or to contradict, because I ^{am} ~~he~~ here to learn. But, one of things that I have found in talking to people, particularly ~~Blacks~~, in trying to come up with some sort of periodization, you know, when does the Civil Rights Movement start? Well, you can pick, practically, anytime. I think that World War II had, obviously, had an impact. If you ~~ve~~ looked, I think three of the more important ~~Black~~ leaders in the 50's in Mississippi - Aaron Henry, and Medger Evers, and ~~Ans~~ ^{Amzie} Moore, all of them were native sons who went

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off to war and came back saying that they weren't going to put up with things the way they were. ^{Amzie} ~~And~~ Moore and others had pointed out to a couple of things in the mid (50's) that had sort of a catalytic ^e ~~o~~ effect. ~~And~~ they mentioned Brown decision, of course, and it's aftermath, and also the Emmett Till lynching, as having. *e*

PYLES: *e* Yes. *e*

DITTMER: *e* a big affect in the ~~Black~~ community, as well as the ~~White~~. ~~And~~ so, I'm sort of following that up, but I'm also interested in a couple of years before the Willie Magee case, and I was wondering if you could just talk a little bit about how you got involved in that, and I'm sure there's a good deal of interest surrounding that. *e* and

PYLES: *e* Yes. *e*

DITTMER: *e* I want to bring, that in as well.

PYLES: Yes. I believe, frankly, the Civil Rights Movement in the South ^{began} ~~began~~ after the Civil War. The economics of the situation was that

the South, being an agricultural society, was in poverty. The ~~Whites~~ had the land, but they did not have the labor. ~~And~~ ^{no} one had the finances to carry on agriculture. So, in a desperate move, immediately following the Civil War, the ~~Whites~~ and the ~~Blacks~~ ^{the} - the ~~had~~ former slaves here in Mississippi - cooperated for their own economic survival in this thing. The ~~Whites~~ provided the land and what capital they had, and the ~~Blacks~~ provided the labor. ~~And~~ ^{they} were eking out a very, very ~~precarious~~ ^{precarious} existence economically under that situation; but they were making progress, ~~And~~ had they been allowed to continue in that economic effort together, the history of the South, I think, would have been entirely differently, then what it has been. But, the Hayes-Tilden's presidential campaign intervened in that period immediately following the tragedy of the ~~Grant~~ ^{Grant} administration; ~~And~~ the ~~republican~~ ^{republican} who had a grand in line and plan, as I think you will discover if you investigate carefully the history, and it was a form of subsidies^d for railroads and industries and things of that sort. Not saying that that was too bad, at that time, it may have helped the nation a

great deal. But, the people were ^{revolted} ~~volted~~ ~~or~~
~~were --~~, we might say, at the Grand⁺
~~administration~~ ^{excesses and} ~~excessives~~ violation of the
moral, as well as ^{the} statutory laws ^{Y-}
stealing ^{I-} and so they actually were
determined to ^{elect a} ~~let the~~ Democrats ⁱⁿ ~~into them~~ Tilden,
^{Electoral}
and did! ~~And~~ ^{the} electro college votes in
South Carolina. ^Q ~~I~~ come on in ~~and I'm~~.

SMITH
~~VOICE:~~

Would you like some coffee?

PYLES:

I have some and...

SMITH
~~VOICE:~~

Would you like some?

DITTMER:

No, thank you. ~~Dorothy~~.

PYLES:

And, come on in, I'm expounding with
absolutely no factual basis...

SMITH
~~VOICE:~~

Then I know you're in heaven.

PYLES:

This is Mrs. Smith, and...

Hi.

DITTMER:

~~Hey~~

PYLES:

...this is Dr. Dittmer.

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Smith
VOICE:

Very nice to meet you.

DITTMER:

Very nice to meet you.

PYLES:

So with the ^{Electoral}
~~-----~~ and when the ~~electro~~ college votes
ⁱⁿ
~~and~~ South Carolina, and Florida, Louisiana,
 and one in Oregon. Now, you may have to
 correct my, ~~e~~

~~DITTMER:~~

~~I think you've got it.~~

~~PYLES:~~

with ^{in doubt}
~~e~~ my political reconnaissance, ~~and~~ which
^{Tilden}
 would have given ~~Tilden~~ the presidency at
 that time. ^{But,} The the republicans being firmly
 in control ^{of} the ^{executive} and the ^{supreme}
 court. ~~And~~ managed to get a commission appointed
^{upon it} to determine just who was entitled to
^{Electoral}
 the ~~electro~~ college votes. So, in the mean
 time, they decided to see if they could not
 negotiate some sort of a settlement with the
 South by giving certain concessions. So, they
 met in New Orleans, down here, to work out
 that settlement of the presidency to see if
 they could not agree, ^{get} the Southern states
 to agree to permit the counting of those
^{for}
 votes ~~from~~ Hayes rather than ~~Tilden~~.

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Mississippi was represented by economic royalist, and I think all the other Southern states were that compromise 1877 in New Orleans. Mississippi was represented by L.Q.C. Lamar, J.²~~2~~ George, and[^] - I can't remember the third one, I'll think of it, shortly, and let you know. The results of the agreement was that the financial institutions in the North would provide capital for the carrying on of the economic agricultural empire that we had down here,^{be} [^] cause we had very little in the way of industry, and, as a matter of fact, don't think we wanted ^{owe} much[^] wanted to carry it on as we were. ~~and~~ ~~that~~ ⁺ they would also ⁺ temper the first civil rights acts that were passed during the Civil War and subsequent to the Civil War what is now 42 USC 1983. It ^{started} ~~stated~~ out in 1861, I think, as a spy act to keep spies ^{from} [^] infiltrating too much in the North. But, in any event, those acts were passed by a mad man from ^L Lancaster, Pennsylvania, as you may know. ~~And~~ [^] so, they agreed, the [^] republicans agreed; that if they would go along with this proposal to let them count all these ^{Electoral} ~~electro~~ college votes for Hayes, that they would [^] require that every act would have to be state

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initiated rather than the individuals, and they would continue to let the state courts try the individual cases, which ^{meant in} ~~made~~ ~~an~~ effect, that civil rights would not exist in the private sector, but only in the public sector. ~~And~~ they agreed to that, and they lived up to it, I think. The republicans pretty much lived up to it. As a result, 42 USC 1983 was not utilized until 1936, when the CIO came into existence, and they were attempting to organize the industrial workers. ^{here} ~~My I digress this?~~

Oh, certainly

DITTMER:

~~No,~~ ~~-----~~ ~~C~~

PYLES:

The three people who represented Mississippi ^{were} at that compromise of 1877, L.Q.C. Lamar, E.C. Walthall, ~~A.D.C. Walther~~, and James ² ~~E.~~ George. So, it worked very well. As a result of that compromise, Hayes was elected. Hayes always had a soft spot in his heart, for the South. When that came about, it was no longer economically necessary for the ~~White~~ southern farmer to continue to cooperate with the ~~Black~~ citizen, who had been recently enfranchise. So, as a consequence, the compromise of 1877 completely changed the