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Interview

with

DAISY BATES

September 7, 1990

by John Egerton

Transcribed by Jovita Flynn

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The Southern Oral History Program
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Little Rock, Arkansas

START OF TAPE 1, SIDE B

September 7, 1990

(SIDE A of this tape is an interview with Betty Carter)

JOHN EGERTON: I won't keep you too long. I just had several things I wanted to ask. I really appreciate very much your letting me come by and talk to you. I'd like to get a little background, first, about you. You told me you were born in Union County--in the town of Eldorado or out in the country?

DAISY BATES: Huttig.

JE: Huttig, Arkansas, a little small town? Then you came to Little Rock before you met L.C.?

DB: No, I went to Memphis first and married.

JE: You met him in Memphis?

DB: No, I met him in Huttig.

JE: I see. What year did you get married?

DB: I got married in 1941.

JE: Did you move to Little Rock about that time?

DB: Yeah.

JE: Because you started the paper that year?

DB: Yeah, May of 1941.

JE: You must have come here with the idea in mind to start that newspaper?

DB: Yes and no. My husband probably had that idea. My grandfather passed. He left me some money. L.C. had some money. So we put the money together and bought the newspaper. But really I think he had the idea, but I didn't.

JE: What did you think you were coming to Little Rock for?

DB: That, I don't know [laughter]. My husband told me it was a nice town. So we came, but really I don't have any idea why.

JE: You didn't particularly want to stay in Memphis?

DB: No, I wanted to go wherever he wanted to go at that point.

JE: What can you tell me about the way you remember Little Rock when you moved here in 1941? What was this town like then?

DB: It was calm as I remember. Nobody was pushing for anything.

JE: Nothing happening?

DB: As long as the Negroes were doing what they were supposed to do, everything was find.

JE: Could blacks vote at that time, in Arkansas anywhere?

DB: No.

JE: You couldn't serve on a jury, none of those things. Of course, all of that was just out of the question.

DB: Right.

JE: Do you remember meeting any people outside of Little Rock during those years, or for that matter, anybody in Little Rock, black or white, who, as you think back on it now, had the vision or had the sense that segregation was the thing that had to be changed? Or is it just the case that nobody really thought of that much then; it was out of the question?

DB: Did I meet many people outside of L. R,. who had these ideas? I met a lot of people in newspapering. But segregation was not the question, as I remember, not in the Publishers

Association and what have you. When the Supreme Court ruled [1954]--at that time you know, we didn't have any laws [protecting civil rights]. they would shoot people--a couple in Louisiana simply because they wanted to vote. ().

JE: But nobody talked about getting rid of segregation?

DB: Nobody, no.

JE: That was just beyond question, wasn't it?

DB: That was absolutely beyond the question.

JE: I want to get on the tape some of what you told me about Edith Mae Irby [first black medical student in Arkansas, 1946]. You told me this wonderful story about her coming in the cab to your place and needed \$50.00, and her father had told her if she really needed something, she ought to come and see you and your husband.

DB: She tells that in speeches, I've heard her. That's the kind of person she is. She was a wonderful person.

JE: Now, she finished medical school here four or five later, however long it takes. Then where did she go to practice?

DB: Well, she practiced in Hot Springs. I forget how many years she practiced there. But she moved to Houston.

JE: Houston, Texas. And she's still in practice?

DB: Yes.

JE: Is she married?

DB: Yes. Several children and everything, about four, I think.

JE: Well, what name does she go by?

DB: Edith Irby Jones.

JE: Is her husband a doctor also?

DB: No, he was in education. He's dead now.

JE: I may try to get in touch with her, because I'd enjoy talking to her, I'm sure.

DB: She's a wonderful little gal.

JE: And Jack Shropshire, you said, went up North some place around Gary. Is he a lawyer? Did he finish law school?

DB: Yes, he finished law school.

JE: Good. And, as far as I know, and I believe I'm right about this, they would have been the very first two blacks to graduate from [a white college in the South].

DB: Wiley Branton, I think, was the first--from Pine Bluff.

JE: I don't know of any other state in the South that admitted any black students before that.

DB: To white, to graduate school.

JE: Why do you think that happened, you know?

DB: () Arkansas has had a kind of a liberal element. There were rednecks, but our people were different.

JE: They were always here. There were some, weren't there?

DB: Right. We have more people (). We had () congregation. () came from Louisiana, (), came from Louisiana and Texas, Mississippi. Well, () they've got more people from out of town than they had in Arkansas.

JE: I see. But somebody at that university must have decided that they would rather do this voluntarily than to go through some big hassle with the courts.

DB: Yeah.

JE: Who do you suppose that was?

DB: [Laughter] I don't know.

JE: I think that was about the time that Governor Rainey was governor. Maybe not.

DB: I've forgotten who was governor at that time. ()

JE: I remember Rainey was a bad number.

DB: Ah, yes.

JE: I mean, Arkansas has had some pretty good governors from time to time, but that guy was terrible.

DB: He was terrible. This is some of my pictures.
[Looking at and talking about photos]

JE: How old were you when you moved to Little Rock in '41?

DB: Oh, about 25 or 26. I'm seventy-five now.

[Pause]

JE: You started the paper in '41. Can you think of any racial incidents that stick out in your mind between '41 and '57?

DB: Yes. The murders, I wrote about one in the book. ()
And there were so many. () But ()
case, I wrote about that. It was so plain! () the Negroes
were standing round like that and the guy just shot him.

JE: What if that high school thing never had happened?
What if Governor Forbus hadn't done that? Would there have been

another thing to set this off, or was that just sort of an accident that never should have happened?

DB: You mean in. . . ?

JE: In Little Rock. Just as far as Little Rock is concerned. You know, some town never had any big trouble.

DB: There was unrest, and the Negroes, like Martin Luther King (). He had the ability to () killed () the whole country it would have happened at some other place or time.

JE: Right.

DB: Okay. () Somebody else would need something bigger. I think it was the time. And there were young Negroes like King, educated Negroes, who were concerned about what was happening, and wanted to do something about it.

JE: Especially after the war.

DB: Yeah, after the war.

JE: Did L.C. go in the service?

DB: No. You know, they lowered the. . . how did he get out? He was scheduled to go. The age had something to do with it.

JE: Changed the age.

DB: Yeah.

JE: Right after the war, say from about '45 to '50, a lot of people I talk to think that, maybe just looking back on it, it seems this way, maybe it didn't seem that way then. But that was kind of a golden opportunity in a way for the South to work out some kind of voluntary social change. Because everybody, all the

white people kept saying, "If they'll just leave us alone, we can work it out." And there were some people during that time who were trying, I think, to do that.

DB: Who were sincere. There was not enough of them.

JE: But they just couldn't get it together, could they?

DB: No, they couldn't get together. There were too many against them, and the segregationists had a way of disciplining their people.

JE: Did the institutions fail, the churches, the professions?

DB: They did everything. They burned churches (). Churches were burned. I've gone to church to speak there and (), and the pastor () scared.

JE: But I'm thinking about white churches. Did they fail here?

DB: Yeah, they did.

JE: They couldn't exert any moral authority, it seems? They failed to be able to do that. And the press ultimately failed. It didn't. . . .

DB: Arkansas Gazette in a small way (). I think we came out () but back in. . . .

JE: Back in those times, though. . . .

DB: No, they were doing nothing.

JE: They couldn't do it. At the same time, though, I've met a lot of black people who recognized way back then what needed to happen, and some of them were saying so, even as early as '38, '39, '40.

DB: And to have the courage to do it.

JE: And nobody heard them, you know. I mean, they didn't have any. . . .

DB: ()

JE: Or any platform to make an impression.

DB: Right, right.

JE: And yet, don't you think people knew, I mean, white people, black people, everybody had to have known deep down in the hearts by, say, '48 or '50? They had to know this couldn't last. Or am I mistaken about that?

DB: We talked to a lot of people from Sumter (), and a lot of people who would dare say (). My daughter (), we don't feel that way. ()

JE: But they didn't have the courage to do it.

DB: () had no platform. And back here, just cry, they'd go about their business. They wouldn't () () This was a terrible country back then, at that time.

JE: Yeah, it was. And until the Brown decision came along, did you have hope that something was going to break?

DB: I think we had hope, but we had nothing to back us up. And the Brown decision came along and that was the first time the federal government had ().

JE: If they hadn't come into it, nothing would have happened, would it?

DB: It would have happened someplace else. Somebody was gonna do something. The war, the change, and the ideas. A lot of people wanted to do something. I could tell ().

JE: Knowing all that you know now about the way things finally turned out, can you think of anything that you could have done any differently, way back then, that would have. . . .

DB: [Laughter] No.

JE: I mean, I can't imagine how you could have done any more than you did. You just had to wait for something to break.

DB: Yeah.

[Pause]

JE: And the whole idea about separate but equal [laughter], I mean, it amazes me even now to see how desperately white people hung on to that idea, and even right up to the time Brown came out, Mississippi was passing, and several states were passing laws to try to build up the black schools and make them equal. What a joke that was.

DB: [Laughter] It was pathetic. We're still paying. We've got schools now. We've got special schools. They're trying to educate now, but, I mean, what about the kids, what about all the others who have been deprived?

JE: Thirty years. It's been thirty-three years.

DB: And the () decision was back in 18 something, when the South and North () a great compromise. When the () but () a hundred years. And they turned ()

JE: When did Mr. Bates die?

DB: 1980.

JE: Did you know Brownie Ledbetter's father? Can you remember? He was active around here. I wish I could think of his name.

DB: I guess (). One event at that time, one little () we can find (). Mr. Rogers, a newspaper man (). Johnson, Arizona now. () he said the group went to him, and the () do something for the Negroes. () to Daisy Bates. () if they can put my stuff away. Then they (). If they were going to (). They can't ready for it, you know. So this guy called a meeting. A friend of mine () came and took us () What can you do? () But anyway, he called a meeting at the YMCA, and I was home that day, that morning, and I hadn't gone to the office. () He got on the telephone. He was a very () person, and he called all the Negroes. () leaders, and they met at the YMCA. So a friend of mine () He was a doctor. He's dead now. Came in to see me and said, "Why () Mrs. Bates." () They called out here. Said, "Do you know we're having a meeting out here at YMCA?" I said, "No." He said, () I said, "Okay, (). So I walked in there. They were kind of sitting around in a circle. They were all (). He was talking. Same old thing about we're going to do this () is going to

lead this thing () We need time.
(

). I moved. ().

[Laughter] () and he went back and
told the white group. ()

[Laughter] () lets do the right
thing. Let's go out and talk to () and talk
to people who (). And that's what we did to

But many, many things happened during that time that were small
things, but were courageous things. I took her to (),
richest guy in town, and we were in a meeting. He said, "Daisy,
that man there (). He's young. And he said,
"Bates () during the crisis. He said, "Now
that we're doing, but to tell you the truth, they were scared.
He () white people. But
he said they were.

JE: Yeah, they were. Harry Ashmore, what about Harry
Ashmore?

DB: Oh, Harry, he did really good. ()
wrote some fine editorials. He went and talked ()
speeches were. They were friends. This happened. He went out
and talked to Faubus. () But he
was a nice guy.

JE: But you felt like he was badly compromised when this
happened?

DB: Yeah [laughter]. ()

He called me, and he said, "Daisy, I talked to Faubus. If you give us time, we will ()." I said, "How much time, Harry? It's been a hundred years () all my life." He said, "Well, () At one point, he said, "Well, if they () one or two." I said, "Harry, no. ()

[Laughter] Can't do it that way. But they tried.

()

JE: In the earlier time, do you remember a black man in Arkansas, a black man named Lee, last name was Lee? I think I've been given a mistaken name. Somebody mentioned to me that there was a guy whose last name was Lee, and he was active in voter registration before Brown in Arkansas. I don't believe that's right. I can't find any evidence of it.

DB: I don't know him.

JE: That doesn't ring any bells with you?

DB: No. My husband filed a law suit against the state when he was just part of the movement. We were trying to get (

JE: Doesn't ring a bell?

DB: No.

JE: Those were the main things that I wanted to talk to you about in that period, pre-Brown.

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE B

END OF INTERVIEW