

This is an interview with Ernest A. Finney, State Representative from Sumter County, South Carolina on February 12, 1974, and was transcribed by Susan Hathaway.

JACK BASS: What has changed since 1948 South Carolina politics.

ERNEST FINNEY: Well, you know, that's obvious. '48, I believe that was the year of the State versus Rice in South Carolina. The year that blacks got involved in the Democratic primary process. Of course, now there is black involvement, to some extent, in the decision making process. I don't think it is as forceful as it should be, but at least there is some involvement at that point. The great handicap I see black community operating under are two fold: (1) Is the fact that for so long they've been on the outside of politics, and they have sort of become sort of disenchanted so that it is difficult to get blacks to actively participate in the political process, because they don't believe that it works. And the other fear that I have is the . . . our young people who should be in the forefront of the political process. I am afraid they are just totally disillusioned and do not participate and . . . in large numbers as they should. We have small numbers . . . we have small groups of them that do, but not enough of them. I am talking about our high school and college age youth. That's about it.

J.B.: Do you think that is going to change or is that going to keep on?

E.F.: Well, I think it's going to change as the black

community recognizes the successes which it has, and these people who are successful make meaningful contributions to making the political process work, and the promise of democracy the more realistic rather than some pie in the sky idea. That's my hope anyway.

J.B.: If you succeed in getting this capital punishment bill back in the committee, will blacks perceive that as a victory or will they not realize that it had anything to do with what you were doing?

E.F.: I think that they will perceive it as a victory of a sort, though the black community is divided over the issue of capital punishment. I think that the major victory in that would be that they would see that a black man could get involved in a political process and be influential in the ultimate outcome of the process. I remember in 1954 when I started practicing law in South Carolina, I used to take my clients, who were all black at that time, down to the court house with me sometimes to check titles just to let them see that I could go into the court house, because they didn't believe that a black lawyer could go into the court house. Probably that is the reason that I became active in the criminal practice of law. It gave me an opportunity to perform in front of a group of people who had never seen a black man in the court room practicing before.

J.B.: Where do you see black politics at right now in South Carolina? Where is it heading?

E.F.: Well, I think that you are going to see a different political atmosphere among the black community this year. The idea of permanent alliances is no longer very prevalent.

I think that the black community is going to, by in large support those candidates and positions which more nearly reflect their attitude; and in some instances they are going to oppose candidates not because the other man is any better, but because the person they oppose has failed to live up to the promises that he has made. Frankly, I see the black political situation in South Carolina being fluid this year to the extent that there are going to be numerous changes.

J.B.: Do you see the emergence of any one single black as a political leader in South Carolina?

E.F.: There is no such thing anymore.

J.B.: I am talking about the future.

E.F.: Oh no, I believe that the idea of the day of the political boss is dead. I think there is no black who can claim to be the leader of Sumter County or Richland County or anywhere in this state. I think that every black who participates is going to have his following. There are going to be those who oppose him . . . oppose some of the positions he has taken. The day of dynasty is over, not only in the black community but also the white community, as I see it.

J.B.: Do you think that the day of running a state wide candidate . . . a black state wide candidate is here?

E. F.: I think the biggest problem to that is going to be getting the necessary financial support to carry on a ballot state wide campaign. I had some people who called on me to get involved in the fifth congressional

district race to seat Tom Gettys, but after looking at the congressional district and after looking at its racial composition and after looking at the size of the district, I decided that it would just be impossible for me to make a meaningful race; and of course I had a real problem, that is whether I should give up my seat in the South Carolina House and inspire to something that perhaps . . . I do inspire to, but which didn't seem to be realistic at this time.

J.B.: You don't see a black running for a state constitutional office in your district.

E.F.: Oh, I can see . . . when you said state wide office, I immediately thought of Governor, Lieutenant Governor. Yeah. You've got some other offices where there could be black running . . . the Secretary of Treasurer, Attorney General, and those kind of things, yes. But of course you still have got the real dilemma of getting the necessary financing to carry on a state wide campaign. To me, to carry on a state wide campaign you are talking about four months active work on a full time basis. There are two problems a black would run into and that is (1) he would have to be able to support himself and his family during the interim - there are very few of those on the horizon, and (2) there would be the actual financing of the campaign itself.

J.B.: What about the third party movement, the black third party movement, are they going to field candidates this year?

E.F.: Well of course, I couldn't answer what they are going to do. I supported the original idea of the United Citizen Party because as I invisioned it, at that time it

was going to begin at the local precinct leve and build a strong organization concentrating its efforts in those counties that were predominantly black in the state, and then build upon that basis. Of course, I became somewhat disenchanted when rather than taking what was the constructive approach of building on a local level, organizing precincts, organizing counties, the meeting started off running candidates for Governor, Lieutenant Governor, particularly when they ran them at the time when West was bending knowledge moderate on racial questions and economic issues. He was being opposed by Albert Watson, who in my opinion was ultra-conservative on those two areas. I feared that if the third party movement had gotten off the ground it would have been possible for them to . . . by default defeat West, who was not perfect, but at least in the political realm was a lot more acceptable than was Albert Watson, in my opinion.

J.B.: Did the U. C. P. lose a lot of credibility within the black community because of that strategy?

E.F.: Well, of course, I can't speak for the black community but I think that by in large those people that those people that I have had the occasion to talk with believe that if the U.C.P. was going to be a meaningful factor, they needed to start off and do some door to door campaigning, precinct organization and then become a viable political entity rather than immediately jumping in and saying that this is what we are going to do.

J.B.: When did you make your first political race?

E.F.: 1966, I ran for the South Carolina House.

J.B.: And you got elected in 1972.

J.B.: What differences did you find between '66 and '72 - campaigning and attitudes and particularly white voters attitudes of black voters. The experience, what was . . . was there a significant difference, or was it the same?

E.F.: Well I think that there was a significant difference in the attitude of people. I think that by in large, (1) the black community felt that they were entitled to representation, and they felt that they wanted a black to represent them; (2) I think that on the part of the large segment of the black community there was some feeling that the blacks made up a significant portion of the population of Sumter County and that they were entitled to have some representation in the state delegation. I estimate, for example, that I picked up somewhere between 25% to 30% of the white vote in Sumter County which, I think is quite an accomplishment, not because of me, but because of the change in attitude of the white community. That was in '72 and since I've probably gotten 5% of the white vote.

J.B.: And you interpret that strictly as a changing attitude on the part of the white people?

E.F.: Of course I had had within the ensuing eight years an opportunity to be tested within the political arena, not necessarily as a candidate for office, but being involved in the political process.

J.B.: Was the fact that you are on the state election commission at this time, did that make you more acceptable to white voters?

E.F.: No, I don't think . . . I doubt any of them knew that I served on the state election committee. I doubt that

any of them knew that I served as Chairman of the South Carolina Civil Rights Commission and quit over the . . . what I felt was the inaction on the part of the state to the Orangeburg Massacre. I don't think that those kinds of things really were key factors. It's my view that basically the success or failure of a candidate for the House in South Carolina is to a large extent determined by that candidate's performance in local matters. It is interesting to note that most of my mail and 90% of the people that call me in Supter County want to know something about roads, or schools or something along those lines. Excuse me for a moment, let me go vote and I'll be right back.

J.B.: Do you make many appearances before student groups for example?

E.F.: It's interesting you ask me that question this week. I think I have five appearances to make this week for high school and college student groups. I have spoken already twice. Of course, this is Afro-American History week. I'd say that at least twice a month I make appearances before a student group of some kind or the other. And probably would do it a lot more often, but it is difficult to serve in the legislature of South Carolina, carry on an active practice, and take care of your family, and accept all of the invitations that you get. I don't do it as much as I'd like to do it just because of time.

J.B.: What's the basic message?

E.F.: My basic message is that the . . . as set out in the Constitution of America, the American form of government is the best form of government that has been devised by the

mind of man, and that it is up to us to resolve our internal differences within the black community and put our shouldiers behind the wheels that make the system really work for the benefit of all citizens. And that the hope of American salvation and the salvation of democracy as well know it rests with the black community because we have shown to the country the real substance of what does not exist. If we keep going, we can't make it.

J.B.: Do they believe it?

E.F.: Well I get a favorable reaction. Whether or not they believe it or not is difficult to judge. I might be just a reaction to the small successes which I have had more than reaction that makes them believe that the story is really true. It's difficult to make a kid that comes from a poverty stricken home with no father and no mother, who's hungry, who has to go out doors for the toilet believe that the promises really are there. But if we can create some concrete examples and do some things like the bond issue, which we are talking about in housing, do some real concrete things, I think they would believe it. I believe that there is hope. I believe that much of the attitudes which they express is a result of people not really laying the facts on the line and telling them where they are making mistakes. I think that it's the obligation of those of us who are adults to conduct and carry ourselves so they will listen to us, and when they listen to us, not be willing to just go along with them, to . . . we must tell them what we believe and show them where we are right. We must talk about some of the sacrifices we have made to get where we are and show them we are right. And,

that the salvation is to go ahead and do what has to be done to make the system work. And to not necessarily buy what I say or what anybody else says but to look at it for themselves.

J.B.: Yeah, but most of the young blacks aren't aware of any sacrifices.

E.F.: I don't believe that. They are aware of them, and they just shun them to back of their minds because of the people to whom they are relating to refuse to bring these matters up. They would rather go along with them and let them sort of direct and guide their thinking rather than letting it be a full free open debate. They sort of condescend and go along what they say, but I think we have the obligation to take a positive stance. It's like the movie thing, you know, everybody talks about the super fly image. Well, the super fly image has taken over because the other images of the black community have not been glorified and developed. I think that it's our obligation to try to show them these things. In the discussions that I have and the debates that I have, I do it, I lay myself open . . . there is no claim to be perfect, let's lay ourselves open and then discuss what the facts really are. They're willing to do that.

J.B.: Have the two years you have served in the house indicated anything? Have you seen any positive gains?

E.F.: Oh yes. I think that there is no question about it. There are some positive things. Last year, I think, for example, Jack was here when the budget bill came out, I was ready to take the floor to discuss ETV and University of South Carolina some fourteen million dollars. They immediately called a little caucus. They came over and we talked and as a result

of the caucus we got 1.4 million dollars for social services put into the Governor's budget. We got the educational package reduced from one supervisory person per 600 to one per 400, which was of terrific benefit to the local school districts. I don't see . . . there's not many pieces of legislation passed by the South Carolina house since I have been here that I haven't had some involvement in. I may not have won, but they knew I was here. I can just think of those two right off the top of my head. I think that we are going to get the ten million dollar bond issue over the objection of some very powerful figures.

J.B.: How significant is that ten million dollar bond issue? This will be the only southern state to have anything like that.

E.F.: It's the only southern state that doesn't have capital punishment. The secret of the whole thing is being there and being available to defend your position; and if you do that, I think that you can have a meaningful input into the decisions that are being made.

J.B.: How important are single member districts?

E.F.: Well, as a concept, it is very important because I think that it breaks down the power structure of the state to the point that there would not be such a thing. That the issues would be debated and decided over here, by in large, by all the legislators and not by a few people. I insist that that be done by the Senate as well as the House of Representatives. But as a practical matter, I view it as not being that significant immediately because what is going to happen in my view is that many of your rural areas, your not going to have blacks offering and being able to succeed. I think the plan of reapportionment

which I presented to the Reapportionment Committee, which was adopted by that Committee would have had more immediate impact and that would have broken up the large metropolitan areas where your leadership . . . black leadership is concentrated, would have had more immediate impact. But in the long run, the single member districts, of course, are going to have the impact.

J.B.: How important, both symbolically and substantively is the extension of the voting rights act after 1965?

E.F.: Oh, I think it's very important, absolutely essential. Because without the extension, I think that many of our states are going to sort of go back into their shells. In getting back to a question you mentioned a moment ago about impact and this kind of thing. The South Carolina house last week or week before last passed a mail registration bill. Jack would probably tell you that two years ago he wouldn't have believed it was possible to get that kind of legislation out in South Carolina.

J.B.: What's brought about the change?

E.F.: Being here and doing things, and the participation by local citizens in the electoral process.

J.B.: How much impact has organized labor had?

E.F.: Ugh, Jack that is a very difficult question to answer. If you're talking about on the national level.

J.B.: In South Carolina?

E.F.: Well, organized labor, my friends, and I hate to be critical of them but I'd have to. I remember last year when there was pending in the Judiciary Committee the right to work bill, and as a member of the committee I received a

letter from every major manufacturing and business enterprise in this state urging that I vote against it though they knew I would vote for it probably. But to my recollection I did not receive a single piece of correspondence from organized labor urging me to support that bill. Nor do I remember their appearing before the committee to encourage it getting out onto the floor. Organized labor has made, in my opinion, no meaningful contribution to get minimum wage out of committee and this kind of thing. So, organized labor on the national level has been effective. On the local level in certain sections of the state it probably has been. But on the state wide basis, I don't think it has lived up to its potential.

J.B.: Do you think they are increasing their role?

E.F.: What?

J.B.: Do you think they are increasing their role?

E.F.: I don't know. It's been my view that they have probably been holding their own at the minute. See what has happened, I suspect is the fact that with the attraction of additional industry and the going up of the living wage of people, that they have become less interested in organized labor but more interested in the economic issues. To give you an example, in those parts of this state where the white community is the most (?) the black community is the closer together. In other words, there is a direct relation between the amount of pressure that is being applied to a human being and the strength to which he stands up . . . the straightness of his back. By the same token, I suspect that as we get additional industries, as these people move from \$1.60 per hour

to \$2.25 per hour they are going to forget about . . . not be interested in organized labor as much as they would be as when they were making \$1.60. And somehow they have not been able to fill the gap.

J.B.: Do you see an active coalition developing between blacks and blue collar whites, organized and unorganized?

E.F.: I would think you would have some developing on the local basis, but I don't see any state wide organization.

J.B.: Does your white support come from primarily from middle and upper income whites or lower income?

E.F.: I haven't really looked at it from that point of view, but thinking back I would suspect that based upon the precincts I got the largest white votes, it would have been from the upper income.

J.B.: What role did ^[The Orangeburg Massacre] (inaudible) play in the formation of the United Citizens Party, if any?

E.F.: I can't answer that. It was a concept which, as I recall it that was thought up at the Town and Tourist Motel prior to Orangeburg. The implementation came after Orangeburg. I don't know what direct impact it had upon it.

J.B.: Do you see any lasting political impact on South Carolina (inaudible) at Orangeburg?

E.F.: I think that Orangeburg awakened to some extent the black community to the need for more active political participation. It is interesting to note that though everybody talks about how far along we are. Kent State has been reopened, Orangeburg has not been reopened. I wonder why a federal grand jury has not reopened the Orangeburg investigation. Can you say that it's because the poor kids killed were white at

Kent State, that the three kids killed at Orangeburg were black? We have made some progress in some relative terms. We have made some progress, but we have a long way to go.

J.B.: Another thing, in Orangeburg there was a trial, at Kent State there wasn't.

E.F.: Well, Orangeburg we did have a trial after a fashion.

J.B.: Where do you see the Republican party in the black city?

E.F.: I don't know. As I understand it, there is an interesting coalition between the Republicans and the blacks in Charleston. But, of course, Charleston is an independent state upon itself, so I don't think it has any significance on a state wide basis. I think it is going to depend to a large extent on the people who grab control and keep control of the Republican party. If those people are of the cut of being moderate and being concerned about the issues that are important and relevant to the black community, then they will attract black support. As I view the news media, accounts are at the moment that there is a power struggle going on within the Republican party for control, it depends upon which group grabs it. I don't believe that in '72 and '74 that there is going to be any significant defection of blacks to the Republican party on a state wide level. I don't think that they can change their image in that short a period of time. Down in Charleston if a fellow like Arthur ^{Pavene}~~Robert Elwin~~ were to get involved in a race then there could be some.

J.B.: There are those who contend that because of all the historical social economic reasons involved, that blacks because

of the lack of educational opportunity and limited political experience have more difficulty in ticket splitting and, therefore, very likely . . . very few times are likely to occur when blacks will be voting for both Republicans and Democrats in the same election. Do you agree with that?

E.F.: Oh I do agree that it does constitute a problem when you are talking about a massive turnout of voters, and particularly where you have a black candidate running for office on one ticket or the other. If it's a black candidate, you know what you do . . . concentrate on seeing that your votes count. By in large, this is why we were so happy to get the single member shot. Of course that accounts for some black victories in South Carolina. It's a real practical situation, it is more difficult and the lack of educational opportunities participation has contributed to this idea.

J.B.: Do you think you would have gotten elected without single shot?

E.F.: Based upon the final vote, I probably would have. I probably did not pick up over 900 single shot votes and I won by something like 1200 or 1500 votes.

J.B.: Do you see blacks and Wallace voters getting together in South Carolina? Or, do you think they are already together?

E.F.: No I don't believe they could get together politically. I think that the power structure of the state has done the tremendous job of keeping one issue in the forefront and that that issue is still there, and they have refused to allow it to die and go away and that, of course, is the issue of race. If it

were not for that, and in the evolutionary process in the next five or ten years when race becomes more of a factor, as it is becoming every day, I can see that they would get together because their economic and job interest problems are of the same.

J.B.: Usually when race is becoming more of a factor or less?

E.F.: No, less.

J.B.: Less. So you see it heading in that direction? Do you think that is true south life?

E.F.: I don't know Jack. I am just saying . . . I'm just an old country lawyer down in Sumter County and that's about all I go. I don't get a chance to go anywhere else.

J.B.: You resigned from the Civil Rights Commission. You were chairman of the Civil Rights Advisory Committee from South Carolina. You resigned when?

E.F.: I don't remember the date. I resigned shortly after Orangeburg. (Break in conversation)

J.B.: You said the power ~~struggle~~^{structure} keeps the race issue in front?

E.F.: I was talking historically in that concept. I don't think the power structure any longer keeps it in front. They have now started to working on issues which are otherwise. Of course they are still the ~~sudleties~~^{subtleties} of race that we still have with us. But in the context that I used it a moment ago, I was talking about historically they kept the race issue as the dominant issue, that of course led to the complete division between the poor whites and poor blacks.

J.B.: Do you think then that there is a direct correlation

. . . that is that race diminishes as an issue that economic coalitions will form naturally?

E.F.: Yeah.

J.B.: Getting back to Orangeburg. You were getting ready to say why you quit the Civil Rights Commission Chairmanship.

E.F.: I quit because I didn't think that the national government was doing anything that they should have done on the investigation that they should have done down in Orangeburg. We spent some time down there while the troops were there. We conducted interviews, we wanted a federal grand jury to return indictments, we wanted the federal government to move in and take some positive steps. They absolutely refused despite . . . I think it was Father Hesberg who was chairman of the national committee at that time . . . his efforts and so it was just a frustrating experience and I decided it would be better to just quit rather than staying in something that you weren't doing anything with.

J.B.: Do you see more blacks moving into the state legislature regardless of what type of reapportionment plan has developed?

E.F.: Yes. I think that they would have to . . . if nothing else they are going to be trade-offs . . . when I say trade off, you know you have got to support a black in order to get other candidates elected.

J.B.: Will single shot voting not be a detriment to that sort of trade off?

E.F.: Well you know we have the money to play the game that's been played for years. Single shot voting . . . there

are precincts that you just can't tell the people what to do.

J.B.: But there will be enough sophistication that . . . to trade, is that what you are saying?

E.F.: That's absolutely right. (inaudible) I have let the people know where I stand. I haven't always voted the way they thought I should, but they knew where I was.

J.B.: You've enjoyed it?

E.F.: I've enjoyed it.

J.B.: Have there been any surprises at all in so far as your acceptance here?

E.F.: Yeah. Not necessarily the acceptance but there have been surprises in the . . . you know when I came over here I thought there were going to be two or three people that were going to say this is what's done and you do it and that was the end of it because ^[The Press] ~~(inaudible)~~ sort of indicated they were true. There were a group of people that just had ironclad control over it. I have gotten every assignment that I have sought since I have been over here, and I have never had anybody to pressure me or even maybe once or twice ask for a vote, that has been the surprising thing. There has not been the pressure that I expected from people who were in positions of leadership. I found that if you do your job, and they know where you stand, they don't put any pressure on you. If the news accounts are accurate that they had control, it was not so much that they had control because of anything that they did, it was because people let them control them. I've never had anybody to challenge or try to get me to change a vote.

J.B.: Are you finding it to be a more democratic process

than you expected?

E.F.: Yeah. There's been no shutting off the debate on crucial issues during fillabusters. . . it allowed full free opportunity for debate. It's a lot better than I thought it was going to be . . . a lot better.

J.B.: In what ways . . . in that sense?

E.F.: In that sense. There is no stifling of opportunities. I haven't missed a session in two years. I haven't missed a committee meeting and when they do something, I'm going to be there. I don't find any pressure at all. They may not agree with you, and my deskmate and I have philosophical differences that go back ten years, but by in large we get along fine. He respects me and I respect him and we vote our convictions. And I have found the same thing true with the leadership of the house.

J.B.: What do you see as the major problems facing South Carolina in the South?

E.F.: Education, to me, is probably the greatest problem facing the State of South Carolina today. We have got to find a way to upgrade and more nearly equalize our educational opportunities which are available to all of our youth. We have also got to find a way of protecting and supporting our public school systems; as the private school movement grows I see a definite threat to the maintenance of the quality of education available on the local level, and I favor the concept of moving toward state wide support of total public education with perhaps some small county supplements in the area. But you could envision one of the issues which is hot right now in the black

community in certain counties is the fact of whether or not a school teacher who has her children in private school should be allowed to teach in the public school. Well, it's a good sounding issue. But, of course, when you really look at it, it gets to be a problem in some of our counties. Now that's all right in those counties where you've got the black vote to get an increase in tax for your schools next year. But in a country where you've got say a one-third percentage of your population is black and fifty percent of your school population is black, what happens next year when you have to get a ~~(inaudible)~~ ^{millage} increase to keep your education at this level.

As you antagonize the white community, what happens when you have to vote on it. It is very involved and not as simple as it appears to many people. Of course, the other issues which I see being crucial to this date is the matter of job opportunities for our unemployed and underemployed and related to that, of course, is the housing, which is an acute problem as I view it throughout the state of South Carolina. I've got figures which show that something like one-third of citizens live in housing which is not sound and about 20% live in housing which is unfit for human habitation. Those would be my three major issues that I see.

J.B.: How do you evaluate the John West administration?

E.F.: Well, of course, as an individual I think John West made a valid effort to do the things I think he would like to see do, but recognizing that the State of South Carolina is a legislatively dominated state, I don't think

that he could do but so much. The legislature controls everything in this state just about, and until our legislature becomes more inclined to move progressively, it is going to be difficult for anybody who is Governor to implement most of the programs he is going to implement on social reform and social type legislature.

J.B.: What direction do you see the legislature heading?

E.F.: In that direction. I think that the legislature is becoming . . . we talked a moment ago about some of the things that have been accomplished within the year and a half that I have been here, and I see it moving in that direction with the possibility of single member districts there might be some retrogression because you're going to find some very conservative single member districts created and they are going to send some very conservative legislators up here. But, by in large, I think that there will be . . . at that point there are going to be a lot of liberal districts sending some liberal legislators, so that we will have to end up with compromises and negotiation between two equals . . . two equal groups rather than one dominant group negotiating with another. To me, that's not meaningful negotiation unless the people have almost equal strength. That's like me negotiating with Exxon to try to get the gas prices down, they'll have a little bit of an advantage over me.

J.B.: Is there anything else that you want to say that we haven't covered?

E.F.: Anything you want to ask me. I am not a speaking man, I talk, I like to bull and to answer questions but I can't think of anything.

J.B.: What difference does it make in having the black representative on the Judiciary Committee?

E.F.: Well I think the Judiciary gives more thought and attention to the issues which are of concern to that representative and hopefully would be of concern to the black community. The Judiciary Committee never reported on the Capital Punishment bill (Break in conversation). Talking about the Capital Punishment thing, the Judiciary Committee refused to report out the Senate bill which passed the bill by a vote of 38 to 4.

J.B.: Do you think they would have reported this bill out if you hadn't been in that committee.

E.F.: Yeah. Yeah.