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Simpson County Historical and Genealogical
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An Oral History

with

Gary Otha Parker Jr.

Interviewer: Joe White

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Biography

Gary Otha Parker Jr. was born to Rev. G.O. Parker Sr. and Emma Mae Beasley in Harperville, Scott County in September 1920. His father was a Southern Baptist minister; his mother a teacher. He went to Union School in Newton County up to the ninth grade. At the age of fourteen, Parker's family moved to Magee, MS. He graduated from Magee High School, enrolled at Copiah-Lincoln Junior College, and then completed a year at The University of Southern Mississippi. Parker worked in the newspaper business in Collins after leaving USM. He volunteered to serve in the Marine Corps in August 1942 and was stationed overseas. Parker married in 1947 soon after returning. His wife, Etta Mae Kees Major, had married during the war and had a daughter, but her husband, a pilot, died in a plane crash in New Guinea. Gary and Etta Mae had three children, in addition to the daughter from her previous marriage.

He returned to the newspaper industry after returning to the States, working at *Simpson County News* in Mendenhall, leasing the paper in 1946. Parker bought the *Magee Courier* in May 1948, which he owned until selling it in 1970. He then worked for five years at the employment service in Mendenhall. Parker also served as the president of a funeral business for eighteen years. Shortly after buying the *Courier* in 1948, Parker was elected mayor of Magee, a position he held for ten and a half years.

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AN ORAL HISTORY
with
GARY OTHA PARKER JR.

This is an interview for the Mississippi Oral History Program of The University of Southern Mississippi Simpson County Project. The interview is with Gary Otha Parker Jr. and is taking place on April 19, 2003. The interviewer is Joe White.

White: My name is Joe White. Today is Saturday, April 19, 2003. This interview is conducted under a grant from the Mississippi Humanities Council and is under the direction of the oral history project at The University of Southern Mississippi in Hattiesburg. Today we're talking with Mr. G.O. Parker at his home in Magee, Mississippi. Mr. Parker, you had previously stated that your full name was Gary Otha Parker, G-A-R-Y, O-T-H-A, and that you were born September 28, 1920, in Harperville in Scott County. You had said that your parents were Reverend G.O. Parker Sr. and Emma Mae Beasley, B-E-A-S-L-E-Y. Your father, a Southern Baptist minister, you said, was born in the Pea Ridge Community near Harperville. Your mother, who was a teacher, was born in the Malco Community near Harperville in Scott County. You'd said your parents were married on May 10, 1918 at First Baptist Church in Carthage. When you were fourteen your parents had moved to Magee where your father pastored the First Baptist Church. You had also mentioned that you attended the first nine grades at Union in Newton County prior to moving to Magee, and you graduated from high school at Magee High School, attended Copiah-Lincoln Junior College in Wesson, and attended The University of Southern Mississippi at Hattiesburg for one year.

Parker: This house here is next door to the parsonage that we lived in.

White: Is that right?

Parker: And my wife, we were friends for a long, long time. Never had a date. And when I got back from service, she had married, and her first husband was killed in World War II and had a four-year-old daughter. And so we got married in 1947 and married in the living room of my father's home in Carthage, Mississippi.

White: While he was still pastoring there.

Parker: While he was still pastoring at Carthage.

White: Now, what was her name before you married?

Parker: She was Etta Mae Kees and then Etta Mae Kees Major. His name was Major. He was a pilot and was killed in an airplane crash in New Guinea.

White: Now, you and your wife had four children?

Parker: Had three children.

White: Three children. Could you name them and the daughter? Can you name them all?

Parker: OK. Counting her daughter, her name was Carol Major, and she was four years old when we married. And then we had our son Gary Parker who was born in 1949 and then my baby daughter was Cathy(?) Parker, and I don't know that I can give you her birth date, but it was about five years after Gary.

White: I have problems remembering my daughter's birthday, also. (laughter) I don't mean to jump around here, but this seems to be a pretty good time while we're talking about family, to talk about military service and what you remember about it. And then I promise you we'll get back to family and sort of go on from there. You were in what branch of the service?

Parker: I was in the Marine Corps.

White: You like the Marines?

Parker: Yes, sir. Yes, sir. I'm very proud of what they've just done, too. (laughter)

White: I'm sure of that. And when did you join?

Parker: Well, when I left Southern. I went to work in the newspaper business in Collins with Jimmy Arrington, and I was in Collins when the draft came up. And I volunteered on August 28, 1942, and then after my service stint, I came back and went back to work with Jimmy Arrington in Collins in the newspaper business. And from there I went to the *Simpson County News* in Mendenhall.

White: Well, we're segueing off of military into newspapers here, and that's one of my interests, too. And so we'll just go ahead and include that, too, while we're doing it. You went to school here in Magee. Is that right?

Parker: I graduated Magee High School.

White: I'm presuming, even though I worked for a newspaper, and I question whether some of the people I work with are educated, I'm presuming you got an education before you went to (laughter) work with a newspaper. So that's the reason I asked you about school. You graduated here in Magee.

Parker: I graduated in Magee, and I got acquainted with the newspaper business in a vocational guidance course where we could take all of our academics in the morning

and work uptown in the afternoon. And I got a chance to go to work for the *Magee Courier*, and that's where I got printer's ink on me. (laughter)

White: Well, that's a good place to start, and I understand you later owned it for a number of years.

Parker: I leased the *Simpson County News* from August the first, 1946, until I bought the *Courier* on May the first of 1948.

White: Right. So to kind of synopsize here, you started first your newspaper work in Collins with Mr. Arrington.

Parker: That's correct. Well, I worked in high school here in Magee.

White: Right. I meant out of school.

Parker: Yes.

White: And then went from there to the *Simpson County News*. You leased it from the Hale(?) family probably, didn't you?

Parker: Elijah and Nora Hale(?), that's correct.

White: And he had died around that time, did he not?

Parker: No. They lost their son, their only son, in World War II, right at the close of World War II, and Elijah and Nora were still alive. And they were just kind of shaken up at that period of their life, and they asked me would I consider leasing the paper, and I did.

White: Well, I remember Miss Nora, but I'm glad to know—and I now remember, now that we're talking, I remember hearing of their son being killed and what a tragedy that was.

Parker: His name was Billy Earl Hale(?).

White: Right. But you leased the *Simpson County News* for what period of time?

Parker: From August the first, 1946, until I bought the *Courier* in May of 1948.

White: And who did you buy the *Magee Courier* from?

Parker: I bought it from Mr. C.C. Bryant(?). He was (inaudible) family actually owned and ran the paper. He had two sons that were printers and a daughter, also, that worked at the paper.

White: Well, during your—and you ran it until you sold it and retired. Well, you went into another business or two, I believe.

Parker: Well, I owned the *Courier* twenty-three years and retired, sold it in 1970. And then after I sold that, well, I went to work with the employment service in Mendenhall briefly. I was asked to come up and fill a vacancy they had, and I hadn't intended to stay, but I stayed five years.

White: Well, that's briefly (laughter) in the long range of things.

Parker: And then Howard Upton died in the funeral business here, and I was a member of the board of directors, and they asked me would I consider coming in as president of the corporation. I ran it for eighteen years.

White: So you did that temporarily for eighteen years.

Parker: Temporarily for eighteen years.

White: Just to fill in. (laughter)

Parker: That's correct. (laughter)

White: I understand how those things happen in life, for sure. I'm sure you could tell us a lot of stories and probably some that you don't want to tell about the newspaper business, but what were some of the highlights during your years of running the newspapers in Simpson County? What seemed to stick out?

Parker: Well, I have a number of highlights. Of course the year that I leased the *Simpson County News* it was election year, and it was the year that had your veterans' tickets. The veterans were just coming back, and they were all qualifying for office. That was quite an interesting year there, and in the interim, well, John Smith announced for highway commissioner.

White: John B. Smith.

Parker: John B. Smith, and was elected by a very close margin over Mundell Bush(?).

White: That was for southern district (inaudible).

Parker: That was southern district, and I did a lot of printing for John and got out a special edition for him. They hauled it all over the southern district there. We put out 100,000 copies of the newspaper for him up there at the *Simpson County News*.

White: Well, your reputation over the years has been as much a political mentor as it has been a newspaper man. Is the newspaper business what interested you in politics, or did people just come to you to seek that kind of help?

Parker: No, really I never did like politics. (laughter)

White: That's probably the reason they came to you to ask for your help, then.

Parker: But I did do a lot of consultation in regard to politics.

White: A lot of printing, too, I would imagine.

Parker: A lot of printing as a result of that. In fact that gave me a good start that year of taking over the *Simpson County News*, all the political printing that was going on. That gave a serviceman a chance to get his feet on the ground. But then shortly after I bought the *Courier*, I was elected mayor of the City of Magee. I served there for ten and a half years.

White: Well, that's sort of connected to politics, I believe, a little bit, too. (laughter)

Parker: It has a little agenda in the political field, yes. (laughter)

White: What about some of the specifics in printing? What's changed over the years?

Parker: Oh, it's made a complete conversion. When I first went into the printing business, it was all hot type and a lot of hand-set type and things of that nature. You had to have hot metal that squirted up against the linotype (inaudible). That's where the line of type came out of. That's where that name came from, line of type. And then we had to hire our engraving done to run pictures and all that kind of thing, but each page, you might say, that was in a form, it weighed about a hundred pounds. You had to lift that and put it on there. Today offset, four pages weighs a quarter of a pound on the zinc plates. (laughter)

White: Were you still letterpress at the paper when you sold it in 1970, or had you converted?

Parker: No. I converted to offset partially. I never did convert the typesetting to offset, but I bought a offset press, printing eight pages at the time. And that was in—see, I sold it in [19]70. That was about 1968.

White: (Inaudible) a job printing, big job-printing business.

Parker: I had a commercial printing business along with it and also an office supply business in the (inaudible). But we did a lot of job printing. I had—

White: You stayed with hot type for job printing?

Parker: I had hot type, and I went offsetting for job printing, also. I built a new building in 1950, and I built it in view of having to make a change from one to the other, but I—

White: From hot type to letterpress?

Parker: I reluctantly gave up hot type and made the error of my life. Instead of a handfed press, I bought a Goss(?), an old Goss and had to go into my new building and tear half of it up in order to build a pit and all that kind of thing. And we operated it that way for a couple of years, but I never did get the print out of it that I wanted. So then I had to turn around and buy my offset and start again. (laughter)

White: Start the whole process over, again. The servicemen who came back and got into politics are bound to have changed a lot of things in Simpson County.

Parker: Oh, yeah.

White: What are your recollections of the biggest changes that were made shortly after World War II? Any economic changes, business (inaudible)?

Parker: Oh, yes. When I first took over the *County News* up there, we had the old PA, office of price administration that was in charge of—had everything frozen, you know. And it was hard to get a hold of printing supplies and things of that nature.

White: Even after the war was over?

Parker: After the war was over, but then this is what started breaking the Depression down for us. It got to freeing money, and people got to being employed again, and all that—

White: —talk about the postwar in just a second. I'm going to stop this tape so we can change it to the other side.

Parker: Well, practically every county office was manned by a veteran. Sam Johnson(?) was elected sheriff. Bill Scarbrough(?) was elected chancery clerk.

White: Sam Johnson had been on the Bataan Death March, if I remember right.

Parker: He was taken prisoner of war in Corregidor and was in the Bataan Death March, and they took him to Japan, and they put him in the nickel mines there for the whole war, and he was there for five years.

White: And who else did you mention? I'm sorry. I didn't mean to interrupt you.

Parker: Bill Scarbrough was chancery clerk. Garland Reed(?) became circuit clerk. And of course this put a new dimension on politics, county politics there. But like we were just talking about, the GI Bill was a tremendous thing for the veterans. I never did use mine, but a lot of people got their educations as a result of that. And I had planned to go to the University of Missouri and complete my education; had been accepted, but couldn't go the first semester because they didn't have an opening.

White: Is this before the war or right after the war?

Parker: This is after the war. And I was going on the GI Bill, and for some reason, I don't know. I met my wife, and we got married, and that ended that deal right there. (laughter)

White: You didn't give too much thought to the University of Missouri (inaudible).

Parker: Well, I didn't look into it any further (laughter) because I knew I had two mouths to feed. (laughter)

White: Was there any change in party politics as such when the guys came back from the war, or was it still about like it had been, as far as running for office?

Parker: No. Of course the main (inaudible) is about like it had been as far as running for office. Of course back then everything was predominantly Democrat under President Roosevelt with the war and all that kind of thing. You didn't have too much of a two-party system at that time, but that gradually came into being. The qualifications and the way you voted and everything, it didn't change. It was the same.

White: Right. Now, I promised you we would get back to family. I think at some point we do need to get back to family here and growing up. We've got about five minutes on the side of this tape to just, to go back to some early childhood stuff. Can you tell me what some of your earliest memories are when you were growing up around Magee?

Parker: Around Magee?

White: Right.

Parker: Well, yes, I have a lot of memories from Magee. When we moved here, well, all the streets were gravel. You didn't have any paved streets, and then it was in the Depression. There wasn't any money. I remember that—

White: You were what age when you moved here?

Parker: I was fourteen years old when we moved here. And Daddy had called us together in Union when the Depression hit and told us that we could buy three things

downtown. Told Sidney(?) and I, said, "Your allowance will be five cents a month if I have the five cents." So that's the way it went.

White: Did he ever have the five cents?

Parker: Well, there's times he didn't have it. I guarantee you. But anyway, Magee, of course some of my fond memories. I went out for football and played football here at Magee, and I'd never been around a golf course, but they wouldn't let preachers' people play golf back then.

White: They wouldn't?

Parker: No. The membership of the church wouldn't put up with it because they gambled on the golf course. (laughter)

White: Right. Do you suspect anything like that might be happening today?

Parker: Well, I don't know. I've gotten to the age to where I can't swing my club, so I just really can't (laughter) comment on that subject now. (laughter)

White: It could be that he doesn't want to comment on that subject. (laughter)

Parker: But then Magee became a consolidated school here right after we moved here, and then later they consolidated with Old Hickory and with Dixie down there, and I think the enrollment was 720-something in school at that time.

White: Was that grades one through twelve?

Parker: One through twelve.

White: You were talking about gravel roads through here then. Automobiles were pretty prevalent then, but I imagine during the Depression there weren't a lot of people who could drive them, were they?

Parker: Well, they couldn't get tires, and they couldn't get gasoline and all that kind of thing because they rationed gasoline. I know when I came home on furlough, I told Daddy I'd like to use his car some. He said, "Well, you welcome to use it, but," says, "we hadn't got any gasoline." Well, they gave us some tickets—

White: Servicemen?

Parker: —to use. And I said, "Well, I'll furnish the gasoline, if you'll furnish the car." (laughter)

White: He was probably more than glad to do that, huh?

Parker: He was. He was.

White: If he could keep tires on it. Tires were a little bit hard to get, also.

Parker: Oh, you couldn't hardly get tires. That's the truth. And they had it rationed (inaudible). Of course I think he got a little allowance for being a preacher for a few extra gallons, but not a great deal.

White: Do you remember about when the restrictions from World War II started weaning off, when people started being able to buy things like tires?

Parker: I'm going to say it was about 1947 and [194]8 there. Well, you could get tires before then. I'd say about the time the war was over in [19]45, it started lifting itself.

White: You mentioned about your father being a minister, getting a little bit of an extra allowance for gasoline or something, to visit church members. What was it like, growing up, as a preacher's child?

Parker: Well, at the time that we were growing up, we thought it was real tough, but it's one of the greatest things that ever happened to Sidney and I. Of course we have a legacy there that is unparalleled, but growing up, the first day in school, I got in trouble. Daddy took us over to the schoolhouse out here in Magee, and boys was picking at us and calling us sissies and all this kind of thing and that kind of thing.

White: You were not only preacher's kids. You were new in town.

Parker: We were new in town. And so when we got our first break outside, well, they started coming up and picking on me. And when they did, well, they had two of us to whip. So we got in a good brawl out there at that time. And then one of the funniest things that happened here was one of Daddy's deacons stopped him in front of one of the stores downtown and says, "Preacher, I want to ask you a question." Says, "Why is it that preacher's kids are always the meanest kids in town?" Daddy didn't blink his eye. He said, "Because all they got to play with is the deacon's kids." (laughter)

White: Didn't have too many more question, either, I (inaudible).

Parker: But really and truly, we were real restricted. We couldn't leave the yard. People could come play with us, but we couldn't leave the yard because they afraid people start talking about getting into something. So Sidney and I did a lot of fighting among ourselves just to have something to do. (laughter) And then we couldn't go swimming because they didn't believe in mixed bathing back then. We couldn't play golf, and we couldn't go to a dance. We couldn't do any of these good things that people do.

White: Well, did that cramp your style any when you started dating?

Parker: Well, yes, because we had a very definite time that we had to get in, and these kids around here wasn't used to getting in (laughter) at a certain time, so they carried us high about that, too. And therefore we didn't date a whole lot. I never had dated a girl until I moved to Magee.

White: You had talked earlier about some of the things that you did after you got out of the newspaper business. And one of the things was working for the funeral home here, so many years on the board and then actively working for them.

Parker: Yes.

White: Could you talk a little bit about not only your years of experience in that, but the funeral home industry itself in Simpson County, and how you've seen it change? What was it first like, when it first came to your attention? Maybe even before you started working with them.

Parker: Oh, yeah. I used to hang out down at the funeral home a good bit when Mims Mitchell(?) had it here. And in fact I was interested in making an embalmer, and my daddy wouldn't let me. He said, "You're going to college. You're not going to make an embalmer." So that ended that. But I was always interested in the funeral business, and I used to ride in the hearses with them and go make the death calls and things like that, just as a kid. But it was amazing to me the number of things that would happen at a funeral home that you wouldn't think would happen at a funeral home. Back then the funeral home didn't have any ethnic—they cared for both black and white. And I remember one time that there was a black man had to be carried back out in the country to be buried, have the church service. And the hearse couldn't go because of the muddy roads, so they had to put him in a wagon, and he had tremendous arthritis. So they had to weight him down with some weights in order to carry him laying down in the casket. And at the close of the service out there, well, had a house packed full. The windows was open and no air-conditioning and everything, and Mims went down to open the casket, and the weights had come off, and he set right up in the casket. He said, "Lay down, Josh. You ain't going nowhere." He looked around, and there wasn't a soul there. They'd gone out the windows and everything else. (laughter)

White: Everybody'd left.

Parker: That's right. (laughter)

White: And that was during your high-school years?

Parker: This was during my high-school years, yes.

White: Other than that event, were there any unusual services that you attended over the years?

Parker: Yeah. Down in Mount Olive we had a kind of an unusual thing to happen there. They was having a graveside service, and of course the family was very distraught during that graveside service. And all of a sudden, the widow just let out a awful scream down there, and the little boy, he broke down and started crying and all this kind of thing and says, "What on earth is the matter, you crying about?" He says, "They just shot Grandpa." (laughter)

White: He thought somebody had just shot him at the funeral, huh?

Parker: Yeah. Says, "They just shot Grandpa."

White: (Inaudible) he didn't understand what had transpired earlier.

Parker: That's right. That's right. But this other situation, I had a family I had to wait on after I got to be active in the funeral business down there. And the old gentleman, I knew him well. Never wore anything except a pair of raggedy overalls. So when he passed away, well, he had one son; he had three daughters that came in. I was making the arrangements. Well, when we got all the arrangements done, he'd already kind of preselected his casket, so that wasn't any problem. Well, then the boy says, "Well, let me go out to the car. I want to get the clothes that he's going to wear." So he came in, opened up the bag that they was, had a right new pair of overalls and blue shirt. And one of those daughters went into orbit; wasn't going to have that at all. And she says, "We going to put him in a suit." Well, they got in quite a confrontation among themselves. He said, "No. I'm in charge." And said, "This is what Papa's going to buried in because I told him I'd bury him in this." Well, she wasn't going to accept it. So finally, make a long story short, they looked at me, got me right in the middle. I said, "Well, I don't normally do this, but I want to kindly help y'all resolve this thing here." I said, "You would have to buy a suit of clothes." She said, "Well, I'll buy a suit. That's no problem." I said, "Well, let me make this suggestion to you. We'll put his overalls on and the blue [a portion of the interview did not get recorded]. That way he will be, look like he's buried in a suit and also in his overalls." (laughter) And that's the way it got over with. (laughter)

White: He got to wear his overalls the way he wanted to anyway.

Parker: He got to wear his overalls, and she had her coat. (laughter)

White: Well, that's good. Let me think just a minute and see if I have asked you enough of your historical background. Do you remember your grandparents?

Parker: Oh, yes.

White: Could you tell me who they were?

Parker: Well, I remember my mother's grandparents. Now, my daddy's father was Sidney Parker. He died when he was forty years of age with diabetes, and Daddy, I think, was twelve years at that time.

White: Out there in Scott County?

Parker: They was in Scott County. [A portion of the interview did not get recorded.] He had to come from Mississippi College to nurse her, but she remarried again and was married to a Reverend W.S. Ford(?), married to a Baptist preacher. And I knew him over the years. He used to visit with us, but I never did see his father. Now, my grandparents on my mother's side, Mr. Rufus Beasley, and then her name was Fanny Sharp(?). They were the ones that lived at Malco, out Harperville, and my daddy had two sisters. And he was the only boy, and my mother had three sisters and two brothers, pretty large family.

White: Yeah, that was a pretty widespread family there. Do you remember some of the families who were pioneer families in Simpson County, as it were, who were big members of the church and big members of the community, right about the time that you moved here?

Parker: Yes, I remember some of them. Now, one of the real pioneers of here I never did know. His name was Ellis Burnham(?). He was the man that owned practically all of this land through here and donated the right of way for the railroad and all that kind of thing.

White: If you scratch deep enough in Mississippi, you usually find one man who donated most of the land to the churches and things. Burnham?

Parker: Ellis Burnham and his son was Dr. T.J. Burnham who was a dentist here. So they were a pretty prominent family, and he was married into the Russell family, I think, and things of that nature. Anyway, some of the prominent people in the Baptist Church when we moved here was, they called him Captain Smith. He lived right across the street from us here. He was the mayor, and he and his son were in the sawmill business, and they had a commissary and had all kind of holdings downtown. His son W.F. Fordage Smith(?) lived right up there. And then Etta Mae's father was not one of the pioneers, but he pioneered the banking industry here. And they moved here in 1923, and of course, all of these that I mentioned now were deacons in the Baptist Church. And R.L. Everitt was a big factor in this community, in Simpson County and everywhere else. And he was a deacon around there. And Mr. E.T. McAlpin(?) was one of the founders of a lot of things around here. McAlpin family has always been a family of prominence.

White: Is Zollie Bill(?) his son?

Parker: Zollie Bill was his brother.

White: His brother. He was the principal at Pinola.

Parker: Right. That's correct.

White: He was his brother. And I wondered about that connection there.

Parker: They were brothers, and he had another brother by the name of Gabriel and another one by the name of (inaudible)—brothers and one sister, I think, was all that was in the McAlpin family.

White: The early businesses in Simpson County pretty much revolved around agriculture in some way or another, didn't they?

Parker: Oh, yes.

White: Mercantile business and the gin business.

Parker: Yes.

White: Could you talk a little bit about like what you saw when you came to Simpson County? What Magee was like as far as the business district goes?

Parker: Well, Magee had a business district on Main Street, and that was about the substance of it. And one of the merchants was L.G. Horne(?), Horne Brothers. He had been sheriff of Smith County, and after he left Smith County, he came over here and bought a home and bought a business. He and his brother went into business here. Then R.L. Everitt(?) came in here, and he was a big agricultural man. He owned extensive land around here and was raised on a farm, and he's the one that (inaudible) in the ginning business and all this kind of thing, that development. Cotton was king at that time.

White: Was there one gin here, or was there more than one?

Parker: No. Mr. Everitt started off with one whole gin, and then he added another one. Then the Magee Co-op later on added another gin. So we had three gins here that would go all night long, night and day, during the ginning season. And then you had a fellow, Ware(?), that had a Ware Brothers Store here, and he was more or less mercantile. And then you had your grocery stores, just kind of small stores where people, they'd use homemade, [home]-grown products and things of that nature and some canned goods. Mr. Everitt also got into the grocery business and also the hardware business and all that kind of thing.

White: Probably still a pretty big livery business around here, huh?

Parker: Yeah. Used to have a delivery business where they'd deliver to your homes and all that kind of thing. Colin Mangum(?) was one of the merchants there, and he'd call Mother, call her every morning and say, "What do you need?" She'd say, "Well, the only thing I need is if you got any fresh turnip greens, I could use some of them." It wouldn't be five minutes till a man be up there with a (laughter) thing of turnip greens.

White: Need a little of that now, don't we?

Parker: Yeah. (laughter) But we had a Magee Hospital here at the time, Dr. Diamond(?)founded it, and it was in an old boarding house just across from the school down there. And then he later built Magee Hospital, and he was bought out by Dr. Pruitt(?) and Dr. Coates(?). But anyway we had several country doctors here that made house calls at all times and had two drugstores, I believe—three drugstores at the time. We had one drugstore that was down there where the bakery is on Main Street now.

White: Almost at the intersection of Main Street and what's now called [Highway] 149, that bakery?

Parker: [Highway]149, that five-way intersection. And there was a fellow, Smith, had a store right across from there, and then a fellow McAlpin and him got into a shooting match in the alley back of there, and the bullet went all the way through (laughter) and went into that drugstore, and they had a marble top counter there. And the old soda jerk had just washed off his glasses, and everything was put on there. And that bullet hit that thing, and he took off. We had some interesting times back here then. (laughter)

White: It certainly sounds like it. (laughter) Not to push any names here, but that McAlpin wasn't a member of the prominent McAlpin family down here, was he? (laughter)

Parker: Yes, he was. He was the brother I couldn't think of a while ago. (laughter)

White: I somehow thought he was. (laughter) Or might be anyway. The icehouse played a pretty big part in the community (inaudible)?

Parker: Had a big business here in the icehouse, yes. And then of course it wasn't too long after we moved here that Mr. Everitt put in his cold-storage plant along with his—he had his own slaughter pens and all that kind of thing around here, so that's where Nory Sullivan(?) started off, the one that's put in the operation in Mendenhall.

White: When did the icehouse close up? When did that go out of business here?

Parker: Let's see. Make an educated guess on that, but it was about 1940 or something like that, [19]42.

White: Well, it stayed in business in Mendenhall a little longer than it did here.

Parker: Yeah, French(?) stayed in business longer than it did down here.

White: I can remember when Mr. French was still open in the [19]60s. Well, I'm going to say late [19]50s and maybe 1960 or [1961] or something like that.

Parker: He was still open when I went to the *Simpson County News*. He still run the icehouse up there.

White: Do you remember going to the icehouse? Did they do anything other than just cut ice back then and store ice?

Parker: Well, no. They'd have ice-cold watermelons. They'd have all kind of watermelons at that icehouse there, and you'd go there and buy ice-cold watermelon back in that day and time.

White: I'll bet it was cold.

Parker: Oh, it was cold. And I got my introduction to the icehouse in Union. They had a melee of, it was a big train center there. You had to go across five railroad tracks to get to the icehouse. I started driving when I was nine years old, sitting on a Coca-Cola case, and Daddy sent me to the icehouse to get a block of ice, and we'd put it on the bumper, back bumper, and we'd bring it home. And I had to cross nine railroad tracks twice to get back home with it, and Mama was about to have a stroke when I got—

White: Was this in a car?

Parker: It was a car. It was a 1928 Chevrolet. (Inaudible) (laughter)

White: And you drove it when you were nine years old.

Parker: I was riding with him one afternoon. He delivered somebody there, and I said, "Well, Daddy, why don't you let me drive?" He pulled that thing over and stopped, got in there. We had paved streets in Union at that time. And he said, "You think you can take this curve here?" I said, "Yeah, I think so." So I drove it. So about two days later is when he sent me to the icehouse on my own. (laughter)

White: Sitting on a Coke case.

Parker: Sitting on a Coke case. Had to, to see out. (laughter)

White: When was the first car you owned? Do you remember that?

Parker: First car that I owned? Yes, I remember it very distinctly, when I was in Collins. I bought a Model-T Ford from G.T. Everitt up here for twelve dollars. (laughter)

White: Twelve dollars.

Parker: And I commuted back and forth to Collins in that car.

White: From Magee to Collins.

Parker: Yeah. (laughter)

White: Now, let's see. Now, that's when you worked for Mr. Arrington at the newspaper down in Collins.

Parker: Well, that's when I worked for him, but I bought it when I worked for the *Courier*. I was making two dollars a week, and I was paying a dollar a week on the car.

White: Oh, is that right?

Parker: Yeah.

White: Half of your salary on your vehicle.

Parker: That's right. (laughter)

White: Well, how much did gas cost?

Parker: Oh, you didn't have to worry about gas. Gas was about a nickel a gallon, and then on a T-Model Ford, you could put you about a gallon of gasoline in there, and then put kerosene in on top of that, after it got running. You could run it forever on kerosene.

White: But you had to crank it on gas first.

Parker: You had to crank it on gas first.

White: And that didn't hurt the engine, to run it on kerosene?

Parker: It didn't hurt my engine. I don't know (laughter) what it did to anybody else's. (laughter)

White: Well, you know, I don't think I ever heard that. That sounds like a pretty good way to do things.

Parker: Well, of course, you didn't want to put too much in there because you had to have gasoline to crank it with again. So you didn't want to get it too overrun with the kerosene. (laughter)

White: Well, did you ever have any unusual experiences traveling from here down to Collins? That's a pretty good way to go in a T-Model, wasn't it? That's what, (inaudible) miles?

Parker: Well, I didn't go very often. No. I always had a safe trip, there and back. Sure did.

White: The old highway, which was [Highway] 49 then.

Parker: Forty-nine.

White: And is now called [Highway] 149, the two-lane—

Parker: That's still [Highway] 49 to Collins.

White: It is four-lane now. I was speaking of the old two-lane highway, which is still in existence in Mendenhall, was the main thoroughfare to the Gulf Coast then, as it is now, I'm sure.

Parker: That's correct. That's correct.

White: It was paved, wasn't it?

Parker: Oh, yes. Yes.

White: In the [19]20s?

Parker: Well, when we first moved here it wasn't paved because you'd go from here to Jackson on gravel.

White: Well, if I'm not mistaken, the highway between Magee and Collins and down that way was paved before the highway to Jackson was.

Parker: That's correct. That's correct.

White: And I don't know why I was thinking that, but—

Parker: Well, that's correct. I think, because I never traveled on a gravel road to Collins.

White: Well, the traffic was not too heavy, though.

Parker: No. You didn't have a lot to worry about. You just hoped you didn't have a flat (laughter) because there wouldn't be anybody coming along to help you with it. (laughter)

White: Well, there was something to be said for those solid rubber tires that they'd had earlier, but I don't think they rode nearly as well as the pneumatic tires. (laughter)

Parker: Well, I'll tell you another something about that little Ford, now. One of my best friends in Collins was an embalmer at John's Funeral Home, and they had an old invalid coach and what have you, junked out there. And he said, "You know we ought to put some signs on this thing." So on the front we put the sign of Invalid Coach, (laughter) and we put a sign on—(brief interruption)

White: —some of the politics in Simpson County, particularly as it involved people who came back from World War II. But we hadn't covered much on earlier politics or some other politics. Do you have any particular memories you'd like to share on that?

Parker: I have a real memory of the time that T. Melvin Bishop was elected sheriff of Simpson County. T. Melvin was raised back out on a red hill in Sumrall Community back out here, and he was poor as Job's turkey. He had a big family and all this kind of thing. He made his campaign on horseback and wearing tennis shoes. I did know how many pair of tennis shoes he wore out in that walking all over the county, but everybody—

White: About what year was that?

Parker: This was 1936 I'm pretty sure. T. Melvin would go down into the field where they was picking cotton, see a lady down there that had a cotton sack on her shoulder, says, "Here, let me pick for you a while." And he'd pick cotton for them, trying to get votes and all that kind of thing. (laughter)

White: Must have worked, huh?

Parker: Yeah, yeah. And enough people voted for him for fun that he got elected. And the first thing he did—I can see him now. He bought a Chevrolet car with the doors opening up from the front from Walsh Fagan(?) down here, and he had them out there installing a new taillight sign on there, like a Chevrolet sign, had "Sheriff" written across there. After he was in the sheriff's office, it was close to Christmastime, and he didn't have any money. And he was trying his best to figure out how he was going to get something for the kids to get for Christmas. And he was setting there in front of his fireplace that night. Said he didn't have an orange in the house; didn't have an apple in the house; didn't have a dime or anything to get any with. Said he looked up and saw his old shotgun up there, and he got that double barrel right out on the front porch and shot twice. Said here comes one of his boys out there, said, "Pa! Pa! Is there a burglar?" He said, "I thought it was, but," said, "I've just killed Santa Claus." (laughter)

White: He didn't have to worry about buying anything for those kids. (laughter)

Parker: And then I remember in another one. See, he had a quartet. He and his brother Grover were in a quartet, and when I was in junior college I liked to listen to the Stamps Brothers out in Del Rio, Texas. I tuned in on it one night. They says, "Well, we glad to have Sheriff T-Melvin Bishop and his quartet from Simpson County." Said, "We'll now let them have the whole program." (laughter)

White: And this was when you were in school. [A portion of the interview was not recorded.]

Parker: (Inaudible)

White: Never know about Mississippians, do you? What other—

Parker: But after that, let me add this to that. After that, he made a lawyer, and he was a lawyer for the rest of his life.

White: There were some other pretty interesting political figures over the years, too. Wasn't there another circuit clerk who had a large number of children, too? You said Mr. Bishop had a large number of children. Mr. Harvey, was that his name?

Parker: Yeah. Crip Harvey(?). He had a large number of children, and he ran for circuit clerk there, and he was elected, and he served several terms.

White: I think I remember reading about him. Was there a lot of mudslinging in politics?

Parker: A lot of mudslinging in politics. In fact there was another very strange thing happened in the political arena when I was in Mendenhall. Some people in Mendenhall got them a candidate for United States Senator, and he was in opposition to one that a majority of the people wanted. But they got out and started talking, talking, talking, and John Smith was taking a pretty active part in one of the groups, the one that wasn't too popular around there.

White: The highway commissioner John Smith, you talking about?

Parker: No, he was Sheriff John Smith at that time, chancery clerk. Chancery clerk, that's what he was. And so they went to see him and told him, says, "John, you're on the wrong ticket. You need to get off of that, now, and get in with the rest of us." He said, "Naw." "You better watch it. You going to get beat." "No. No. I think I can handle my campaign all right." And he never did change. So the other group reached in his office and got Walter Jones his chief deputy to come out and run against him. And John was a talented orator. Walter couldn't speak at all. All he said, when he got up before the public, he said, "I'm Walter Jones, running for chancery clerk." And

said, “All I want you to do is pass the pie.” He beat John, and John said he could see pie coming out his ears when he went to sleep at night. (laughter)

White: With just that short speech.

Parker: Yeah. That’s all he said, “Pass the pie.” (laughter) He bought a ad in the paper, “Just pass the pie.” (laughter)

White: Politics has always been a little bit fiery in Simpson County. I imagine it has in most other counties, too. There’s been a good bit of political wrangling between the towns of Magee and Mendenhall all these years. Can you think of a good story to tell on that? I think they got together one time. Didn’t they? Is that when they sort of agreed on the location of the Universal Manufacturing Plant here in the early [19]60s?

Parker: That’s correct. Well, yes. It was pretty lively at times in the political arena in Simpson County. And it was always a strange thing because everybody in Magee was kin to everybody in Mendenhall, and everybody in Mendenhall was kin to everybody in Magee, but they was going different directions when it came to politics. (laughter)

White: Still. About politics and football they couldn’t along. Is that right?

Parker: That’s right. That’s right.

White: One other subject we need to finish up here at the end of the interview and everything. I don’t feel like we had asked you enough questions—[a portion of the interview did not get recorded]—[military] service and about what others did here. You had mentioned that you were in the communications end of the Marines. What did that involve?

Parker: Well, that involved, I went to radio school. They sent me to radio school, and I was in the Marines. They sent me to the Air Corps, and so I went overseas. I left in March of 1943, going overseas in the communications outfit and was assigned to the First Marine Air Wing over there, in the communications outfit. And that involved Morse Code, all this kind of thing. And then they sent me down to the—

White: Is that intelligence information from one unit to another one?

Parker: Yes. And also decrypting and encrypting, putting stuff in code where it couldn’t be—and then they sent me down to the Navy base operation center down there, which was the net control of all. This was in the New Hebrides, now. Esperanto Santos Island, and they had us down there, and we were net control of everything, and all the conditions reds that come in, come through us. And we’d have to dispatch it out. The Coral Sea was real active at that time, and we’d get the other information about ships being hit, and, “We’re listing,” and this and that and the other. And we was having to put that to intercept the command and all those kind of things.

But it was a real interesting thing, and of course what a lot of people don't realize, in communications, I wasn't a rifle-carrying Marine. But communications is a real hotspot for the enemy because that's the first thing they try to do is knock out your communication. So we were targets for bombings and things of that nature at all times. When we got overseas, of course we had to dig down in the ground, put coconut logs and everything over our deal to keep from getting blasted out at times.

White: Well, you know this might be a good point to end up on. History is a always-developing thing, and hundred-year-old history is no more important than a one-year-old or a one-month-old history. In that vein, what do you think—it's very obvious what role communications plays to the military these days, and I'm speaking of what we've been seeing on television with what's going on in the war between U.S. and Iraq. What are your impressions of how warfare has changed since you faced it from World War II to the War in Iraq today?

Parker: Well, there's several changes. Of course communications has been upgraded and all of this kind of thing, but there's one thing we had back there that they don't have now that I know of. This was established in order to keep them from breaking our code. We had a bunch of Indians, Navajo Indians, and they were known as Air Talkers, and they would talk plain text. The Japs went crazy trying to break that code, and they never did make it. And I had one Indian in my platoon that I went through with, and he was University of Oklahoma, chief of his tribe and all that kind of thing. They were intelligent people, and I heard one on TV here the other day. He said that, talking about that, they finally gave them commendations for the work they did over there, and says, "We was not fighting for our country. We were fighting for you-all's country." Said, "Our country was here before y'all came." (laughter) Which is true. But anyway, another thing, as far as the Marine training and Marine tactics and everything, it hasn't changed any. I've heard some of the boys coming out of boot camp. It's very rigorous.

White: War is still hell.

Parker: Yeah. War is hell, and it's a dirty business. There's no doubt about it, but I heard on the news today where they was talking about the peacekeeping units over there. They been talking to the Marines about it. They said, "No. We fixing to go home. Our job is to bust in. The Army is to keep the peace. And we going to turn it over to them." Which is true. The Marines get the first call, really, to go in on a landing or something like that. But it's the most gratifying thing to know that you were a member of a force like that.

White: I can imagine so. That seems to be a good point to end on. Thank you, sir for talking with us.

(end of interview)