Oral History: Moses Newson
Interviewed by Marshand Boone

Boone: This is Marshand Boone interviewing Moses Newson at the Civil Rights symposium at Syracuse University. Good morning Mr. Newson, how are you today?

Newson: I'm fine.

Boone: What was your job when you first became aware of the civil rights story, what was your first position?

Newson: Originally, I worked for five years with the Tri-State Defender in Memphis, Tennessee. That was 1952 until 1957. After that, I spent 20 years with the Afro-American newspapers in Baltimore, Maryland.

Boone: Ok, with your first experience in Memphis, you said 1952 to 1957, many notable events, like the murder of Emmett Till happened. Did you cover those events or write any stories about that?

Newson: Yes. The Emmett Till case was one of the early ones that I did. I suppose the first school desegregation case I covered was down in Hoxie, Arkansas. And it was fairly peaceful from the beginning. Later they had trouble there. What was significant about Hoxie was that it was the first Southern school system to integrate. The Emmett Till case, which happened in 1955 I think, brought a lot of attention world wide about how it happened, how it turned out. The case involved a 14-year-old, Emmett Till, who had come down from Chicago to visit with relatives in Money, Mississippi. And while there, he supposedly whistled at a white woman, and as a result of that, a few days later, the woman's husband and brother-in-law of the husband took the boy out, took him from his uncle's home, actually kidnapped him there, and they took him out, beat him up pretty badly and then shot him in the head, put him into the Tallahatchie River. And that resulted in a trial in Tallahatchie, Tallahatchie County, Sumner. It was there because that's where the body was found, in that county. It was a, sort of a dramatic case to cover. Immediately after the black reporters got there, we were told by Sheriff (Clarence) Strider that there would be no integration at the press table. And in fact, we were instructed that we would sit in the audience. Eventually that was changed – there were protests by some of the reporters and Congressman Diggs, who had come down as an observer. It was a trial that hardly anyone expected to see the two men convicted. One of the things that happened was that Strider, who normally would have been working for the prosecutors, he decided he would help the defense that led some of the reporters there to feel that we needed some more witnesses. And I went out one day with three members of the NAACP going through some of the plantations, looking to see if we could come up with some more witnesses to take part in the case. Actually we changed into old clothes, the kind of things the plantation people

wore, and went out looking. We did come up with a couple of witnesses who eventually testified at the case.

Boone: It just sounds like that was probably one of the biggest stories you worked on. Was there a competition among black reporters who worked on that case?

Newson: I don't know if a lot of people really wanted to go to Mississippi to work on that case. It was thought to be a sort of tense situation down in Mississippi. There had been a couple of murders sometime before then, people who had been working to get black people registered to vote. And there were quite a few there. I know probably, we had several people there, and a couple of other Johnson publications had people there. And a couple of people represented newspapers in St. Louis, so there was pretty good coverage there. The two men who were involved were eventually freed, found not guilty. And although they had admitted that they had done the kidnapping of the boy, they also were freed of those charges. And later, they wrote about the murder in a national magazine, telling their story for money. It was a very tense situation there, because nobody knew exactly what was going to happen, except that not too many of the blacks there thought that there would be any sort of conviction.

Boone: It had to be a pretty tense situation as you just mentioned, but more so, it might be frightening. It's segregation as state, segregation as governor, very few blacks vote, no black elected officials. Were you frightened at any time when you were in Mississippi? Or how did you just feel being there? Did you ever feel like your life was in danger because you were trying to write truthful stories at that time?

Newson: Not in that particular case. I think all the black reporters who covered those stories in the South knew that things could happen that would be harmful to them. I don't know, but I think the idea was to be as careful as you could, watch what you were doing and what others were doing about, and just try to protect yourself while you went about doing your job. Yeah, there were situations, not particularly in this case, but in other cases, where young people and older people were out fighting for their freedoms and equal opportunity that we all aspire to. So, it's a commitment to play a role in that kind of history.

Boone: When you think back to those days before the 1964 Civil Rights Act which provided for public accommodations for blacks and equal opportunity, where would you stay? Would you stay with black families, or would you have to like try to find a room somewhere? Because of course, at that time, if you're talking about the Emmett Till case, there weren't many, well there were no, I'm sure, hotels that would accept a black patron. Where would you live? What was life like in those respects?

Newson: Well, what it boils down to, usually you tried to get a rooming house, a boarding house from someone. Very often you would contact a minister or somebody in the local – you would get in touch with someone from the NAACP or someone who knew people who rented out rooms to reporters and that sort of thing. Sometimes you might have someone in the area that you could contact and get some place to stay. Once in a while, there were places you went where they had small motels or something for blacks. You could use those accommodations, but it was often sort of difficult, and you didn't want to be too far from the scene that you were covering because traveling on the roads day and night sometimes created some problems. So, finding some place to stay was often a problem.

Boone: With the election of President John Kennedy in 1960, he takes office in 1961 and of course this is after Montgomery, this is after Brown vs. Board of Education, and several other events happened. Was there more hope as Kennedy took office? Or did maybe some black reporters, or did you for example, think this might be more of the same? Or did you think a change was on the horizon, a change?

Newson: Well I think many people were delighted at the election of Kennedy, and a lot of things were expected from him. Before him, you know much of the ground had been set, we had gone through the Tennessee desegregation and the government there, Governor Clement had to call out the National Guard. We did Little Rock, and several of us newspaper people were attacked by the mob, but eventually those kids got in and with the help of the federal military. And when Eisenhower sent those troops, that represented the very first time in the history that, that kind of force had been used to carry out a court order, and it meant the end of the kind of protests and demonstrations that we had run into in Little Rock, and still we would get to the Meredith case, which was a pretty bad situation. Also, physically speaking, there were great expectations when Kennedy got in office. At the time the Southern congress people were pretty powerful people. They headed most of the important committees in the Senate and House, and even though he tried and made a lot of efforts, it was very difficult for him to get the kind of legislation through that Johnson would eventually get through – you know, the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

Boone: Right around the same time, you have an enterprising group of people called the Freedom Riders who are challenging segregated city-owned buses. And I believe they rode from the D.C. area all trying to make a journey through the South. You were a part of that, correct?

Newson: Well, I was a reporter going along with the group. And the background, even before Rosa Parks declined to give up her seat to a white man and led to the boycott in Montgomery, Alabama, that eventually resulted in the Supreme Court decision on intrastate travel. In 1946, a woman by the name of

Irene Morgan won a Supreme Court case dealing with interstate bus transportation.

What happened as things went on, the ICC hand down a ruling saying there could be no discrimination in interstate travel, and so James Farmer decided to go out and test whether this was actually happening or not. And they left from Washington, it was to be a two week tour, it ended up in New Orleans. And I guess what was happening, they were using two buses, Greyhound bus and a Trailways bus and on Mother's Day, May 14th, I happened to be on the Greyhound bus that day. And when we got to Anniston, Alabama, there was a mob waiting at the station. And they started breaking our windows and calling names, and threatening people and that sort of thing. Eventually we thought we were getting out of there. There was a long line of cars, and a little car in front of us that kept the bus from picking up speed. What we eventually found out is that they had stuck nails and what not into the tires, and by the time we got to the outside of the city, the bus had to stop and they resumed breaking out the windows and that sort of thing. They tried to get on the bus, but there was a state officer there in plain clothes. We didn't know he was on the bus, but he strapped on his pistol and stood in the doorway, and that prevented them from getting to us on the bus. Eventually they threw a fire bomb into a hole, knocked into the window. Actually it landed in the seat just behind me (chuckles), and we were all able to get off the bus. It was a pretty sad scene out there, people gasping for air and trying to clear the smoke out and that sort of thing, but everybody came out in pretty good shape.

People on the other bus, you know, when they got into Birmingham, some of them were beaten up horribly. A guy, one of the young black guys on the Trailways bus, was severely beaten. And there we had a situation where the police sort of absented themselves for 15 minutes or so, while the mob had their way with the people who were on the bus. It's another one of those tragedies where law enforcement simply didn't function, and it was a very historic thing because some actions, people took notice. And some actions were taken to really enforce travel that would be open to everybody.

Boone: But, while you're there and you're on the bus, I mean of course action did take place and laws passed such as that. But you're on the bus, and the fire bomb lands right behind. Did you think this is too much risk? Did you think, this is just a job and maybe about time to change the type of stories? I mean you're talking about your life being in danger here.

Newson: Well, life was in danger there, but it really didn't change the need to cover those sort of things. As tragic as it was, you know, there were some memories there that sort of stick out in your mind. There was a black woman who was returning from a funeral, and she didn't know what was going on. Actually we were using buses that were regular buses on those routes, and she was down on her knees, and she was praying, and she didn't want to die there or

what was going on. And actually she had just come from a funeral and was on her way home. It was really sort of a touching thing, that being Mother's Day and all, that sort of thing. But you know once you get out of a situation like that, you go back and do the job again. You know, you do get a little shaky sometimes when something like that occurs.

Boone: What would you say was the story that sticks out most in your mind that you covered? Is it one of the ones we talked about or something else? Maybe just the image, just the visual that you just can't get past, or you still think about it till this day?

Newson: Well, surprisingly, you know, you remember the Emmett Till case. You remember Little Rock, you remember the bus-burning story. But just before I went out on the Freedom Ride, I had gone down to New Orleans to cover a civil rights hearing having to do with voter registration, and this was a pretty peaceful setting there. We were in a court house situation and no danger at all, but there we had a registrar who was representing one of the parishes there in that area. And she spent a great deal of time talking about how white people could always pass the test that they were giving, but none of the black people could pass the test. Eventually the civil rights commission people put her on the stand, and she flunked the test herself, had no idea how to pass the test – the test she was flunking everybody else on and was claiming that all white people could pass the test. In my mind, it was just a sort of representation of the duality of the system that the South was perpetrating at that time. And it sort of always stuck in my mind, we ran a big story, "Dixie Voter Official Flunks Own Test."

Boone: That's a very, very interesting story. Did your boss ever give you any guidelines about fairness or balance of – Today you know people always say that the article needs to be fair and balanced, or you have to be objective. Were you ever given those type of guidelines back then?

Newson: Well, you got those in school, and you knew about those. On the other hand, the black press was born as a press to, as a media to do confrontation type of protests against the situation that we were living through at that time. We were quite supportive of changes, progress being made, and I think there was plenty of information out there about where the South stood. And of course, we did that to a certain extent. We interviewed people on both sides of issues, and we reported as best we could, as fairly as we could while it was taking place. I think to a greater extent, we sort of emphasized the subjugation, the problems that black people had, that they had to endure and we tried to bring, in an enforceable way, to the attention of the public.

We weren't concerned terribly about people saying we were unbalanced or that sort of thing. We thought the stories we did would stand up and stand a fair test of what they represented. But, we weren't really hung up on the idea that every time somebody said something on one side, we had to equate that to something

else that was said on the other side. And quite frankly, this thing of fairness and balance often depends on what a person thinks, you know. What's balanced to you and what's objective to you may not be objective and fair to somebody else, so that's something to strive for in doing journalism work. And you have to do that, but at the same time, people often see things differently. We thought it was the role of the black press, to a certain extent, to make sure that the position of black people was out there so everybody could see and examine what their interests were.

Boone: Did you think it was the role of the black press to maybe prod the other prominent papers, like the New York Times and the Washington Post, to expand their coverage of black interests?

Newson: From time to time, we did that. I think the black press and the general press got along pretty good. Most of them understood what we were doing. I think the most dangerous time for the black press, the conflict between general press and white press came in 1942. And at that time, a very famous columnist named Westbrook Pegler, he had one column that sharply criticized the black press. It was war time, and he took the position that the black press continued to press for changes in the military and changes in the society at large was in some way being unpatriotic, and a lot of the white publications took up that issue at that time and made a big thing out of it. But the black press went to the president and explained our position that, that's what we were about. We were not about to give up the battle for freedom. We were not about to stop criticizing the government and others for the way they were conducting affairs of state in order to pacify Westbrook or anybody else.

Boone: We spoke about fairness and balance. I think a couple of questions ago, did you speak with prominent figures like Ross Barnett, or Bull Connor, or George Wallace or any of the really prominent segregationists or any other figures like that?

Newson: Some of the black press did. Sometimes you didn't have good access to these people. I know the Till case, for instance, I didn't talk to Sheriff Strider. I did talk to Sheriff George Smith in Greenwood. He and his people actually arrested the people who were guilty in that case. We had opportunities from time to time to interview people of the kind that you mentioned, and some of the press people did. I didn't interview a lot of them. I did interview a lot of the attorney generals in Washington. I would go and interview all the new ones that came into office and we were concerned about things like appointed judges and federal judges and that sort of thing, which continues to be a big issue today – the Supreme Court. And it has been known to impose some pretty bad decisions from the viewpoint of black people and their welfare. There was Plessy (versus) Ferguson, and at one point the right, the view point that black people had no citizenship rights in the United States or very, very few. One point, 1875, we had a civil rights bill actually passed and several years later, the Supreme Court

actually ruled that bill, that law unconstitutional. So it was always important to talk to people who were in power and had an opportunity to make changes. A lot of black reporters did, or at least tried, to interview some of the people that you mentioned. I didn't try to interview the specific ones that you referred to.

Boone: How about figures like Medgar Evers, and Dr. King, Andrew Young and of course John Lewis who was a Freedom Rider also? I'm sure these are people that you probably knew or wrote about or spoke with.

Newson: Yeah, I had an opportunity to be with John Lewis on the Freedom Ride. He was one of the first people to get sort of attacked down at Rock Hill. I didn't cover too many of the stories we talked about with Martin Luther King, but of course I knew a lot about him. We had people in Baltimore, Maryland, who covered him on a pretty regular basis when he was in Baltimore and other places. I went down to Atlanta to interview him, I guess about a month or so before he died. At the time he was planning the Poor People's March in Washington. And after that, he was going to go back to Memphis for the campaign that was being waged there on behalf of sanitation workers. That was the last time I had an opportunity to talk to him. And though King is highly praised today and should be, Dr. King was under heavy attack at the time that I talked to him. He was being criticized by people from all, you know, sources that you wouldn't think he would be criticized. Part was what he was trying to do for poor people, part of it was his fight against segregation and discrimination, and a great deal of it was because of his position on the Vietnam War. So he was under fire himself at the time I talked to him.

Boone: After hearing several things about the last years that Dr. King lived and, and all the publications and all the documentaries that say, yes he was under attack, he was stressed, you saw him a month before. Was there just this feeling of weariness, tiredness, of attack that you speak of?

Newson: I mean Dr. King, he was a tough guy. And he understands, he had a great understanding of what was going on and how people would react to the work he was doing. I think he was a bit weary, he was a bit stressed at some points there, but I had asked him specifically about some of the criticism that he was taking, and he said, for the story that I wrote, I think it appeared about two weeks before he was killed, he indicated that if people wanted to call him a failure, they could look back at Jesus Christ, and they would probably call him a failure also because he got himself crucified. So he knew what he was doing, he understood the problems he was under you know, keeping money for the staff, and trying to answer some of the complaints he was getting and brick bats that were being thrown at him. Some of the campaigns weren't going as well as he had envisioned and hoped they would've gone. But, he was steadfast in his concerns about the issues that troubled him, and he intended to press on.

Boone: Thinking back over your career, you've traveled, you've covered some of the major events of the 20th century. It's been an amazing life, has it not? Would you say it's been, you've seen some extraordinary things in your time?

Newson: Well, I saw some of the things and witnessed some of the things, and covered some of the things that I think help brought about change in the country. And that was very satisfying. It was challenging sometimes when you were out there, but the results were worth it. I think the media, and particularly eventually the television media, did an awful lot to speed the changes that have taken place and to get us to where we are today. There's no way we would be where we are now without the work that a lot of journalists did, and I think they deserve great credit for it.

Boone: In covering stories, I'm sure you came across the youth movement, in the 1960's. You saw youth, there was a children's campaign in Birmingham in 1963, could you talk about that some?

Newson: Well, I think everywhere the young people were in the forefront. It just would not have happened the way it did had not they played the roles they did. It was amazing that these kids across the country, Little Rock for instance, all the problems that they had, all the criticisms, all the pressure they were under, they came out day after day. Same thing in Clinton, Tennessee, where they had to walk down a hill past a jeering mob to get to their school. All over the country, young people actually stuck their heads out, walked down those hills, walked past the people who were jeering and criticizing after the Freedom Ride disaster when they burned the bus and beat up everybody in Birmingham. I was thinking that that might be the end of it, and suddenly you look up and from all across the country, young people were coming, taking buses and going to places like Mississippi, Alabama, picking up on the Freedom Rides to see that that job got accomplished. And the student non-violent groups – Snick (SNCC) – these people went into areas where they stayed days trying to get people registered to vote, and they were usually hounded by policemen and mistreated by others. And somehow, someway the courage to stand up and stick with it, and they deserve an awful lot of credit for the role they played in bringing about change. And of course you know about the sit-ins when they would go into the various stores and places and just sit there until they got service. There was a lot of bravery, a lot of courage, and a lot of determination to bring change to this country, on the part of young people.

Boone: Your comments bring to mind Freedom Summer, the summer of 1964 when college students, when primarily white college students from the North came to Mississippi, came to the South trying to register blacks to vote. And of course in Philadelphia, Mississippi, three civil rights workers went missing to be found a few weeks later dead, buried in the earth. Did you cover that or did you, what was just your reflection on that?

Newson: That was not one of the stories that I personally covered. As an editor, I wrote you know, I did some criticism of that kind of thing, and we had coverage of it. Our people went down through the wire services we had at the time. That was one of the tragedies that I think indicates the kind of serious situations that these young people were dealing with, and basically they knew the dangers that they were going into. Word got around that you could be pounced upon, you would be followed at night, all kind of things really took place and that, it seems to me, was one of the real tragedies of the civil rights movement. And still, as I said, they kept coming, they never stopped doing that. And that was another awful case where the justice system was not working, and so often people who were supposed to uphold the law were actually working with the people who were against the law and who were defying the law of the land. And that, too, is a tragedy of our country.

Boone: What would you say is the greatest legacy of that time, as far as the reporting you did? And also just a message that we should take from that time period in general?

Newson: I'm not sure there's a great legacy to what I personally did, but I think that through the efforts that many people put into the need to change the system we were living under. That was what I thought was important. The young people, the NAACP, CORE, and others who combined forces, the brave people who went out and did the things – James Meredith spending a year down there in Ole Miss where he had to be protected most of the time. Those people actually laid on the line to help. And people in Congress, Lyndon Johnson and others who pressed awfully hard to bring about some of the change. As you know, Johnson was very instrumental in the 1964 Civil Rights Act that brought a lot of enforcement powers to some of the things that needed to be done.

Boone: Thank you very much.

Newson: Thank you.